

# Chomsky's One Language/Extraterrestrial Scientist Claims

Paul M. Postal

Visiting Scholar, New York University

## Section 1 A Deceptive Claim

It is sometimes asked how many human languages exist on Earth. Evans and Levinson (2009: 432) cite a number between five and eight thousand. But Noam Chomsky has repeatedly expressed a radically different view. Examples:

(1) a. Chomsky (1984)

"Imagine an extrahuman observer looking at us. Such an extrahuman observer would be struck precisely by the uniformity of human languages, by the very slight variation from one language to another, and by the remarkable respects in which all languages are the same."

b. Chomsky (1991b: 26)

"If so, the major task is to determine what are the principles and parameters that constitute the initial state of the language faculty and thus determine the set of possible human languages. *Apart from the lexicon*, this is a finite set, surprisingly; in fact, a one-membered set *if parameters are in fact reducible to lexical properties*. Notice that this conclusion, *if true*, would help explain the surprising fact that there is more than one possible human language; namely, it would follow that *in an interesting sense*, there is only one such language. Surely, if some Martian creature endowed with our capacities for scientific inquiry and theory construction but knowing nothing of humans were to observe what happens to a child in a particular language community, its initial hypothesis

would be that the language of that community is built in, as a genetically-determined property, *in essentials*." (all emphases mine: PMP)

— c. Chomsky (1994)

"For example, there's fairly good reason now to believe that in a certain, rather deep sense, there is only one human language. If a Martian scientist looked at us the way that we look at frogs he might well conclude that with marginal, minor modifications, there is only one language."

d. Chomsky (1995a: 13)

"A rational Martian scientist would probably find the variation rather superficial, concluding that there is one human language with minor variation."

e. Chomsky (1995b)

"A rational Martian scientist looking at us as we look at ants would probably say there is only one language, with peripheral variations."

f. Chomsky (2000: 7 )

"But the initial state is a common human possession. It must be, then, that in their essential properties and even down to fine detail, languages are cast in the same mold. The Martian scientist might reasonably conclude that there is a single human language, with differences only at the margin."<sup>1</sup>

g. Chomsky (2001)

"We have very strong reasons to believe that all possible human languages are very similar; a Martian scientist observing humans might conclude that there is just a single language, with minor variants."

## **Section 2 'Peripheral'/'Minor' Differences**

At first glance, the one language claim (hereafter: 1L) might appear as a revolutionarily profound insight, the sort of thing which could give readers a sense of the often claimed depth and originality of Chomsky's linguistic research and of the research program it has generated. Unfortunately, to use a term introduced in Chomsky (1959: 39) and adopted in Postal (2012) to criticize other similarly groundless claims of his, it is just *play acting at science*.<sup>2</sup>

Since Chomsky is aware that there are thousands of distinct languages, how could he then assert 1L? Part of the answer lies in the claim's systematic hedging, the hedges for (1a, c, d, e, f, g) being respectively:

- (2) a. very slight variation
- c. marginal minor modification
- d. minor variants
- e. peripheral variation
- f. differences only at the margin

Remarkably, claim (1b) is hedged five different times in five different ways, all within one paragraph. Only hedging keeps the (1b) component '*explain the surprising fact that there is more than one possible human language*'; namely, it would follow that in an interesting sense, *there is only one such language*.' from total incoherence. But the price of such hedging is a claim with no actual content.

That is, despite Chomsky's claim of essential identity among existing languages, no version of 1L is precise enough to be assigned a truth value. Rendering it testable would have required specifying an array of significant features, *not subsumed by* the hedges in (2). Equivalently, Chomsky could have specified the peripheral features which can putatively be ignored in assessing 1L. But he has never done either.

The resulting entirely fanciful nature of 1L is revealed by considering various features of reasonably well-documented languages which they do *not* share. Evans and Levinson (2009: 431) already listed an array of such properties, these having been claimed by others to be universals. Limiting the discussion just to syntax, one can cite the following features not considered by Evans and Levinson:

(3) a. Some languages, in fact most I am aware of, have conjunction and disjunction of clauses, nominals, etc.; Pirahã (Everett 2012) has none.<sup>3</sup>

b. Some languages, e.g. Mohawk (Postal 1979), (Baker 1996), have rich systems of verbal pronominal affixes which can occur in main clauses containing no overt nominals at all. Others, e.g. Spanish (Aissen and Perlmutter 1983), while not permitting that, do allow invisible pronominal subjects in many contexts but do not in the same way allow invisible objects.

c. Some languages, e.g. Mohawk (Postal 1979), (Baker 1996), Southern Tiwa (Franz 1985), have productive incorporation of nouns into verbs; others, e.g. English, do not. Compare the following, where verbs are bracketed:<sup>4</sup>

(i) a. Mohawk (Baker, 1996: 293)

[Se-'wahr-a-nut] ne erhar = 'Feed the dog'

[2sS-meat-Ø-feed] NE dog

b. English

\*[meat-feed] a/the dog = 'Feed the dog'

d. Among languages having productive incorporation of nouns into verbs, some, e.g. Mohawk (Postal 1979), (Baker 1996: 310), allow the incorporated noun, seemingly functioning as a direct object, to cooccur in many cases with an overt external nominal based on the same noun also functioning as a direct object. The presence of the two nouns yields no meaning

distinction as compared to a structure with only one of either type. Other incorporating languages, e.g. Southern Tiwa (Donald Franz, cited in Baker 1996: 313), lack this feature.

e. Some languages, e.g. French (De Swart and Sag 2002) have *negative concord* of several types, cases where multiple negative phrases in the same clause yield only a single semantic negation. Others, e.g. German (Richter and Sailer 2006), do not.

f. Some languages, e.g. English, have phrases like *no dog, never, nowhere*, whose meanings involve a negated existential quantifier. Other languages, e.g. Mohawk (Baker 1996: 58-60), Ewe (Collins and Postal 2017: 9), lack analogs of such phrases.

g. Some languages, e.g. Afrikaans (Oosthizen 1998), have so called *bipartite* clausal negation (Bell 2004); others, e.g. standard English, lack such a system. In a bipartite NEG language, a single semantic negation is represented by the presence of two distinct syntactic NEG markers. Possibly bipartite negation can be reduced to a variant of negative concord. Compare:

(i) a. Afrikaans (Oosthizen 1998: 62)

Wie het nie opgedaag NIE?

who has not arrived NOT

"who hasn't arrived?"

b. English

Who has not arrived (\*not)?

h. Some languages, e.g. French, have restrictive relative clauses; others, e.g. Pirahã (Everett 2012, Futrell et. al. 2016), do not.

i. Some languages, e.g. Kanada (Nadahalli, 1998), Amharic (Wolf 1995), Navaho (Speas 1999), have so-called *indexical shifting* (Anand and Nevins 2004). This is a pronominal phenomenon whereby in the complements of many predicates, particularly, propositional attitude

ones, the subjects of such sentences, even when 3rd person, antecede 1st person pronouns in the propositional attitude clauses. Often, in other sentences, 3rd person indirect objects antecede 2nd person pronominals. English lacks indexical shifting.

(i) a. Ronald<sub>1</sub> hoped that he<sub>1</sub>/\*I<sub>1</sub> could find his passport.

b. Vic told Valerie<sub>1</sub> that she/\*you<sub>1</sub> should call your<sub>1</sub> mother.

j. Some languages, e.g. French (Postal 1989), Italian (Belletti 2017) have a so-called *clause union* construction based on causative verbs in which a main clause and its complement clause behave as a single clause (on the basis of e.g. the distribution of pronominal clitics); others, e.g. English, have no such construction.

k. Some languages, e.g. German (Pankau 2013) have *Wh-copies*; other languages, e.g. English, do not. In this phenomenon, extracted *Wh* forms link to resumptive *Wh* phrases in analogous fronted positions. Notably, unlike the usual situation with resumptive pronouns occurring in argument positions first noted in Ross (1967), *Wh-copies* are subject to standard island constraints (Pankau, 2013: 20-22). Compare:

(i) a. German (Pankau (2013: 1)

Wen glaubst du wen sie liebt?

Who believe you who she loves

"Who do you believe she loves?"

b. English

\*Who do you believe who she loves?

The eleven contrastive specifications in (3) suffice to show that 1L is, *if interpreted to have any testable content*, radically false. To avoid that conclusion, the syntactic differences in (3) must be taken to satisfy the hedges in (2). But the presence or absence of coordination, restrictive relative

clauses, negative concord or clause union constructions cannot seriously be considered peripheral or marginal. Nor is there any reason to think the features in (3) could be subsumed under any contentful version of the (2b) speculative proposal *if parameters are in fact reducible to lexical properties*. See section 5 for another perspective on the failure of 1L.

Characterizing all the properties in (3) as marginal, peripheral, etc., would merely highlight an interpretation of 1L devoid of testable consequences. Lacking any characterization of the hedge properties, one could safely call *any* distinguishing feature minor/peripheral, etc.

Beyond the issues just raised lies another massive flaw of 1L. Given the thousands (counted in the ordinary vague way) of languages, on what grounds could one claim to have discovered *any* true principle covering all of them? What evidence has Chomsky presented, could he have presented, which would have justified any nonempty claim with the status of 1L? He has claimed repeatedly that his work is an instance of biological science.<sup>5</sup> Notably then, no real science sanctions claims about a vast population of thousands of entities without a reliable statistically serious examination of a large sample. But Chomsky has never offered anything like that in support of 1L. Thus his 1L scorns the distinction between what is at best only a groundless speculative hypothesis and an actual scientific result.

Chomsky's 1L claim is hardly the only case where he claims with no factual basis at all that something holds for all languages. Consider:

(4) Chomsky (2000b: 29)

"So, take Sanskrit which has a fairly rich system of overt inflections--you hear a lot of inflections. English has virtually none, Chinese has even less; so they look totally different. And, furthermore, they appear in structurally different positions all over the place in different languages, which means that you can't get anything remotely like word-

by-word translations. However, increasingly it is being found that these differences are superficial; that is, Chinese with no inflections and Sanskrit with a lot of inflections seem to be very similar, perhaps identical apart from peripheral lexical features. If so, then for the mind, they're the same. They differ only in the way in which the sensorimotor system accesses the uniform derivation. *They all have the cases and agreement and everything else, even richer than Sanskrit; but only the mind sees them.*" (emphasis mine: PMP)

Here Chomsky claims that it is a scientifically determined fact ('it is being found') that Chinese, English and Sanskrit all have uniform derivations in terms of cases, agreement and 'everything else'. But that seemingly deep and broad claim, putatively embedded in biological science, was made with no citation of evidence, no clarification of what such evidence could be, no references. One recalls Pullum's (1996: 142) insight that Chomsky's then recent work represented both a 'complete collapse in standards of scientific talk about natural language syntax' and that (page 138) the implied epistemology underlying it is of miraculous revelation." The situation with 1L is basically the same.

### **Section 3 Space Alien Scientist Opinion**

The lethal evidentiary gap noted in the previous section is perhaps masked for some by the frequent intellectual trope documented in (1). Supposedly, a rational extraterrestrial scientist (a Martian in the default case) looking at the linguistic situation on Earth could not fail to recognize the validity of the 1L claim. This idiosyncratic rhetorical device cannot be taken seriously. Even if space alien invocation is charitably taken as a thought experiment, the trope remains dubious. In (1a, b, c, e, g), Chomsky speaks of an extraterrestrial scientist as *observing humans*. But real linguists studying a foreign language X can derive very little information from observing



speakers of X. Rather, they need to make use of X speakers knowledge of X; that is, they need informants. See Gibson (2019).

For instance, consider:

(5) No/\*Some Earth linguists who have *ever* been to Mars respect Martian linguists.

Here *ever* is a negative polarity item and as breakthrough work (Fauconnier 1975; Ladusaw 1980) argued, such elements must be under the scope of decreasing semantic operators (those sanctioning inferences from sets to their subsets).<sup>6</sup> But a Martian could observe English speakers continuously for a century without learning anything about the difference between the pair in (5) because the semantic property of relevance is not observable in pronunciations of sentences.

Postal's (1966) review of Dixon (1963) criticized that author's claim that linguistics could operate (exclusively) on the basis of speaker observation. Christina Behme points out that Chomsky too recognizes the limitations of actual speaker observation:

(6) Chomsky (2016a)

"In linguistics we all know that the kind of phenomena that we inquire about are often exotic. They are phenomena that almost never occur. In fact, those are the most interesting phenomena, because they lead you directly to fundamental principles. You could look at data forever, and you'd never figure out the laws, the rules, that are structure dependent."

So there is no way a hypothetical Martian scientist could gain any relevant data about a sample of all Earth languages via informant-free observation. Chomsky has not even tried to explicate how a Martian scientist could avoid the pitfalls of Dixon's position about English in a way compatible with (6). So, even if Chomsky's alien insight invocations are taken as a thought

experiment, it is one incapable of supporting 1L. Moreover since 'the Martian's opinion' is in reality just Chomsky's opinion, the whole exercise is pointless.

Chomsky's appeal to extraterrestrial conclusions is, moreover, vacuous independently of its make-believe character. Suppose that some *actual* Martian scientist W has in some way advocated 1L to Chomsky. W's unsupported opinion would be worth no more than Chomsky's. Real inquiry does not proceed by gathering opinions, space alien scientist opinions or not, but rather, by generating hypotheses, gathering evidence relevant to those and reasoning from that evidence. Chomsky's appeal to the Martian scientist gambit is an unintentional admission that there is no serious basis for 1L. If there were, he could have avoided useless reliance on imaginary space aliens and simply cited the evidence.

#### **Section 4 Lack of Good Faith**

Obviously, when a scholar S asserts proposition P, critics must in general assume that S believes P. That is, a critic must take it that S's assertion is advanced in good faith. This requirement can only be rejected in particular cases on the basis of serious grounds for the opposite conclusion. Unfortunately, there are such in the case of Chomsky's 1L assertion.

The fact that none of the formulations quoted in (1) is drawn from a refereed technical paper in a linguistic journal should at least raise suspicions.<sup>7</sup> Most are addressed to the general public in newspapers, interviews, invited talks, etc. In such contexts, given his long established notoriety, Chomsky no doubt appears to very many nonlinguists as the maximally reliable spokesman for the field of linguistics<sup>8</sup>

However, an audience mostly made up of nonlinguists is in general poorly equipped to evaluate the validity of Chomsky's assertions. This opens the way for exaggeration and play

acting in ways which suggest his activity has a serious scientific basis, which is often obviously missing.<sup>9</sup>

But suspicions do not support any conclusion. Evidence is, though, available for the conclusion that Chomsky himself does not actually accept the truth of a contentful version of 1L, First:

(7) Chomsky (1991a: 23)

"If there were only one human language, the story would essentially end there. *But we know that this is false*, a rather surprising fact." (emphasis mine: **PMP**)

Ignoring the silly 'surprising' claim about what almost everyone now and in the past has known, Chomsky here correctly states flatly that 1L is false. No specific evidence or argument was provided for this claim, which evidently just repeated common knowledge that there are thousands of distinct languages. Nor is this 'insight' attributed to any Martian. For some reason then, at that point, Chomsky sensibly recognized the linguistic variation which renders a substantive version of 1L absurd. But subsequently he nonetheless repeatedly asserted it to mostly nonprofessional audiences, moreover, with no associated discussion of the contradiction. Of course, scholars have the right to change their minds. But I do not believe that Chomsky anywhere justified first asserting 1L (see (1a)), then denying it, as in (7), and then asserting it again multiple times, as in (1b,c,d,e,f).

Extraordinarily, (7) occurs on the next to last text page of Chomsky's first article in Kasher (1991), while (1b) occurs on the first text page of a second article of his. That is (7) occurs in that collection only three pages from assertion (1b), which it contradicts. Both papers were initially invited presentations at a conference at Tel-Aviv University in 1988; (1991a) was the opening paper of the conference, (1991b) the closing address. That Chomsky could publish

(1b) and (7) a few pages apart in the same volume is an excellent indication that his discourse on this topic is make-believe. Even at the same conference he could not keep his 1L assertions straight. And recall that (1b) is itself close to incoherent.

Second, (7) is not the only point at which Chomsky reveals that he knows that a nonempty version of 1L is not tenable. On Feb 1, 2009, the following Chomsky interview comments on Daniel L. Everett's work on Pirahã appeared in *Folha de Sao Paulo*, a major Brazilian newspaper (Thanks to Everett for the translation from Brazilian Portuguese):

(8) Chomsky remarks:

"Everett hopes that the readers do not understand the difference between UG in the technical sense (the theory of the genetic component of human language) and the informal sense, which concerns properties common to all languages. The speakers of Pirahã have all the same genetic components as us, so Pirahã children can create a normal language. Suppose that Pirahã doesn't permit this. It would be the same as discovering a community that crawls but doesn't walk, so that children that grow there only crawl and never walk. The implications of this for human genetics would be null."

Here, remarkably, Chomsky in effect refers to Pirahã, as described by Everett, as not being a *normal* language. But a contentful version of 1L says there is only one language, rendering talk of normal and nonnormal languages incoherent. By pretending the only issue is human genetics, Chomsky insinuates that *even if* Everett's description of Pirahã is correct, it shows nothing generally about language. But 1L is about languages not genetics and as described by Everett, Pirahã falsifies any falsifiable version of 1L. Moreover, Chomsky's attempt to turn the discussion from languages to genetics is futile because to date his entirely nonbiological work has revealed absolutely nothing about language (learning) *genetics*. See Behme 2013 for a glimpse of

Chomsky's relation to actual genetic science.<sup>10</sup> Quotation (8) shows that when 1L is factually challenged, instead of defending it rationally, Chomsky can only change the subject.<sup>11</sup>

Material like (7) and (8) is an indication Chomsky himself knew that the seemingly grand scientific result represented by the 1L terminology was actually nonexistent. Therefore, for years, he sought to deceive audiences into accepting that his make-believe about 1L was a deep truth about natural language.<sup>12</sup> One might contrast that remarkable sophistry with (10):

(10) Chomsky (1967)

"IT IS THE RESPONSIBILITY of intellectuals to speak the truth and to expose lies."

One recalls the arch hypocrite character Tartuffe in Molière's 1664 theatrical portrayal.

(Wikipedia <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Tartuffe>).

## **Section 5 Lack of Motivation**

Ironically, Chomsky's 1L claim is, arguably, based on misunderstanding the implications of his own fundamental and most well-known view, seen in the juxtaposition of the first sentence in (1f) with its remaining 1L discourse. These two remarks indicate that in Chomsky's mind, 1L follows from the assumed existence of an innate faculty of language permitting normal child language learning. But these two ideas are actually independent.

Grant *for argument* that there is an innate linguistic faculty. Nothing a priori determines that this system defines not one but say six distinct *types* of language. These could differ inter alia in ways indicated in (2), that is, could be syntactically significantly different types. A primary task for the language learner would then be to utilize linguistic experience to as rapidly as possible determine which of the six language types the one (s)he is being exposed to represents. In the same hyperbolic terms Chomsky expresses 1L, there would then at best not be one language on Earth but rather six.

Moreover, this distinct language type concept is hardly novel here. For instance, finding a precursor idea as early as Sapir (1921: 120), Baker's (1996: 3) extensively detailed work defines a type of language distinct, for example, from that represented by English. The characterization is intended to pick out polysynthetic languages like Mohawk. These have rich systems of verbal pronominal prefixes, noun incorporation, typically covert subjects and objects, very free word order, etc, contrasting, in particular, with the type represented by English. Baker expresses his view as follows:

(11) Baker (1996: Preface)

"The major theme, however, is concerned with the kind of allowances that must be made for linguistic variation within the theory of universal grammar. This book explores a strong and interesting position on this question, namely, that the characteristic constructions of polysynthetic languages share a common property. This common property can be given a rather simple and precise formulation that distinguishes polysynthetic languages from other types. In other words, there is a single, well-defined "Polysynthesis Parameter". Thus, while the system of syntactic principles in, say, Mohawk is virtually identical to that of say, English, the syntactic structure of most sentences is quite different because of the need to conform to this special condition. This view contrasts sharply with two popular views about language differences, the first holding that languages differ from one another in many arbitrary and unrelated ways, and the second holding that languages do not differ from one another in any syntactically significant way."

Thus in this massively documented 556 page volume, Baker accepts that there are distinct language types and so, as his last sentence makes clear, rejects 1L. One need not accept Baker's

proposal about a single parameter or his particular analyses to see the contrast between his strongly argued, fact-based, proposals, heavily grounded in details about Mohawk and a great deal of crosslinguistic comparison and Chomsky's 1L make-believe.

Moreover, Christina Behme points out to me the following remark:

(12) Chomsky (2016b)

"It is fair to say, I think, that more has been learned about the nature of language, and about a very wide variety of typologically different languages, than in the entire 2,500 year history of inquiry into language."

Behme observes that this invocation of 'typologically different languages' assumes the same position as Baker (1996). This view contradicts any substantive version of 1L since, evidently, if there is only one language, there cannot be typologically different languages. In short, as in (7) and (8), here also Chomsky, without being forthright about it, himself recognizes that 1L does not represent a serious claim about natural language.

## Section 6 Conclusion

### 6.1 Refusal to Cite Results

As has been argued, Chomsky's invocation of 1L and appeal to space alien scientist 'support' for it deceptively attributes to his work some revolutionary insight whose existence cannot be legitimately supported. This unpleasant conclusion is strengthened by considering various occasions on which he has been asked, *by sympathetic interviewers*, to list his substantive results.

For example:

(13) Osiatynski (1984),

"QUESTION: What, then, in the field of linguistics, are the greatest achievements?"

CHOMSKY: I think the most important work that is going on has to do with the search for very general and abstract features of what is sometimes called universal grammar: general properties of language that reflect a kind of biological necessity rather than logical necessity; that is, properties of language that are not logically necessary for such a system but which are essential invariant properties of human language and are known without learning. We know these properties but we don't learn them. We simply use our knowledge of these properties as the basis for learning."

Here Chomsky ignored a request to list achievements, sidestepping instead into talk about ongoing research and its goals. Specifically, he failed to claim having shown that 1L holds.

Similarly, despite the extreme deference with which the editors of Chomsky (2002) carry out the interview making up its Chapter 4, they do twice ask him to list the established results.

(14) Chomsky (2002: 151)

"AB & LR Taking for granted the obvious fact that nothing is definitively acquired in empirical science, what are those aspects that you would consider "established results" in our field?

But all the interviewee will say is:

(15) "My own view is that almost everything is subject to question, especially if you look at it from a minimalist perspective."

If though 'everything is subject to question', then 1L is subject to question, contrary to the way it is described in (1).

Subsequent to (15), Chomsky produced hundreds of words, still without committing himself to even one established result. Instead of offering any evaluable linguistic claim, he defensively implied that *every* science is in the same miserable situation as his own linguistics:



(16) Chomsky (2002: 152)

"Even in advanced sciences almost everything is questionable."

This deeply irresponsible, false denigration of other fields is addressed in Levine and Postal (2004).

Apparently unsatisfied, the interviewers then in effect tried again somewhat indirectly to get him to commit to something:

(17) Chomsky (2002: 153-155)

"AB & LR: Sometimes speaking with specialists of other disciplines, people ask: what are the results of modern linguistics? Is there a way of phrasing some of the results independently from the technical language that makes them opaque for the public at large?"

The interviewee responds at length, but once more without claiming any actual result, hence again avoiding any claim of having justified 1L.

The same refusal to cite any scientific results is noted more recently in Behme's dissection of Chomsky (2012), a report of discussions with philosopher James McGilvray:

(18) Behme (2014: 29-30).

"No one is in a better position to provide such assessment than Chomsky, and, certainly one would expect him to make a strong case *for* the value of his work. When McGilvray asked him about his intellectual contributions Chomsky provided the following reply ...:

JM: Noam, let me ask about what you take to be *your most important contributions*. Do you want to say anything about that?

NC: Well, I think that the idea of studying language in all its variety as a biological object

ought to become a part of future science - and the recognition that something very similar has to be true of every other aspect of human capacity. ..."

Since Chomsky again cited no result, there was of course no mention of 1L.

One sees then that when requested to specify his actual scientific results in linguistics, Chomsky repeatedly refuses to take responsibility for anything. But would not 1L, if an actual result, have represented an accomplishment too great to pass over in silence in response to a question about accomplishments?<sup>13</sup>

## 6.2 But Others Accept the Fakery

While Chomsky, even in response to highly favorable interviewers, has consistently refused to cite 1L as a scientific result, this 'gap' has not gone totally unfilled. Smith's (2004) initial section *Chomsky's achievement*, offers the assessment in (19a), elaborated in (19b):

(19) a. Smith (2004: 1)

"He has shown that there is really only one human language: that the immense complexity of the innumerable languages we hear around us must be variations on a single theme."

b. Smith (2004: 216)

"Working in this field, he has revealed the amazing complexity of human languages but at the same time has provided striking evidence that (from a suitably objective point of view) there is really only one language, and that it is largely innate. "

It would be petty to note that that it approaches incoherence to say in (19a) that there is one human language but that we hear innumerable ones. But even a charitable interpretation cannot

ignore that the formulation with its *really* hedge and vague talk of *variations on a single theme* yields reference to no testable claim about natural language. And, unsurprisingly, while Chomsky is said to have *shown* that 1L holds, Smith fails to reference any works where this supposed demonstration occurs.<sup>14</sup> Naturally, Smith's nonetheless extraordinarily rich documentation of Chomsky's decades long output also fails to cite Chomsky's admission in (7) that a contentful version of 1L is false. All of this highlights the fantasy aspect of 1L.

Consider too, the following, where 1L and the Martian trope are taken seriously:

(20) Pinker (2007: 237)

"Chomsky's claim that from a Martian's eye-view all humans speak a single language is based on the discovery that the same symbol manipulating machinery, without exception, underlies the world's languages."

This passage implies falsely that Chomsky has access to some serious, significantly sampled examination of masses of languages which shows that without exception nothing serious distinguishes any pair of languages. Moreover, this wondrous fantasy is advanced not as a mere hypothesis but as a *discovery*.

While neither Smith's claim nor Pinker's remarks can be taken seriously, they and the discussion of (1b) and (7) above do unintentionally illustrate one of Chomsky's *real* accomplishments: often managing to somehow convince other professional academics to take his dishonest self-aggrandizing pretense as if it were part of actual inquiry.

However, two recent works suggest, more encouragingly, that acceptance of Chomsky's 1L sophistry is quite limited. Svenonius (2016) and D'Allessandro (2019) both survey purported results on generative syntax proposed at the May 2015 Athens Conference (Generative Syntax in

the 21st Century: The Road Ahead). Although the framework of discussion was heavily influenced by Chomsky's ideas, none of the dozens of proposals even mentions 1L.

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## Notes

1 The last line of this quote is unfortunately wrongly attributed to Chomsky (1999) in Postal (2004: 341 n. 9).

2 1L was briefly criticized in Postal (2004: 10, 341 n. 9).

3 Langendoen and Postal (1984: 71-72) claimed not only that all languages have coordination, citing Dik (1968), but also that they knew of no language which had even been claimed to lack that feature. But recent work, e.g. Everett (2012), indicates that there are such languages.

4 While almost all Iroquoianists including Baker mark word-internal stress, it is ignored in the orthography in (3c )

5 The claim is ludicrous. See e.g. Pullum (1996), Behme (2014), Postal (2012) and notes 9 and 10.

6 Actually, for English, a more accurate statement arguably has to appeal to the property nonincreasing. That follows because nonmonotonic operators like *exactly three* allow some negative polarity items, while jointly decreasing but also increasing operators like *zero or more* do not allow them:

(i) Exactly three cats in that group have *ever* domesticated beavers/are *any* good.

(ii) \*Zero or more cats in that group have *ever* domesticated beavers/are *any* good.

7 The failure of the 1L claim to appear in refereed articles in linguistics journals is hardly surprising since, in my experience, trying to find a *refereed* Chomsky article in a linguistic journal over say the last forty years turns up almost none. Extraordinarily, both the government binding and minimalist 'revolutions' in Chomsky's ideas appear to have been introduced, without

his publishing any refereed linguistic article advancing the new ideas. Are there other fields in which the analog would have been possible?

8 (i) Behme (2014b: 2)

"Chomsky is 'the leading figure in contemporary linguistics' (Harmon 2001: 265)." "He is regularly invited to deliver keynote or plenary talks at leading universities, and remains the public face of linguistics."

9 Consider, for instance:

(i) Chomsky (2000b: 17-18)

"In fact, it is conceivable, it is an empirical possibility, though extremely unlikely, that higher primates, say gorillas or whatever, actually have something like a human language faculty but they just have no access to it."

One might observe that it is equally conceivable that tuna also have something like an inaccessible human NL faculty. The travesty of intellectual activity in (i) devoid of *absolutely* any substance was, unsurprisingly, originally part of an invited talk to a general audience, not anything in a refereed professional linguistic publication.

The senseless pseudoissue of inaccessible gorilla faculties arises again in the recorded question/answer period part of Chomsky (2000b) when an attendee of the lecture asked about the claim.

(ii) Chomsky (2000b: 49)

"I did say that but as kind of a joke. I said it is a possibility (it is a theoretical possibility); there is nothing we know about the natural world that tells us that it is false that apes actually have a language faculty but have no access to it. That is possible but there is no reason to believe it. So, yes, there is a possibility and, maybe, some day we will discover

it to be true but nobody expects it; it is more likely that they don't have a language faculty."

The remark 'nobody expects it' conveys the preposterous idea that some linguists spend their time considering whether gorillas have inaccessible NL faculties. Do they periodically notify Chomsky of their progress on this research topic? Statements (i) and (ii) highlight clearly Chomsky's tendency to engage in play acting at science when addressing general audiences.

10. Behme (2013: 505) documents the farcical quality of Chomsky's remarks on genetics by quoting a discussion between Chomsky and noted geneticist Gabriel Dover (see [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Gabriel\\_Dover](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Gabriel_Dover)).

- (i) "The following exchange between Chomsky, who has no training in genetics and never completed any work in that field, and distinguished geneticist Gabriel Dover, is a textbook example of Chomskyan "science".

Dover: ...the whole thrust of modern-day genetics is going against [your] ideas of laws of form and principles of natural law...nothing seems to be obeying laws of form, out of the reach of genes.

Chomsky: That can't be. I mean, take, say, the division of cells into spheres, not cubes. Is there a gene for that?

Dover: Yes, of course there is ... there are tens upon tens, if not hundreds, of genes directly responsible for very wide-ranging differences in the shapes, sizes, numbers, divisions, life spans, senescence, functions, and behavior of the several hundred types of cells in our species. Cells are not soap bubbles. There are constraints of course but these



are a matter largely of history not of physics, over and above the obvious physics/chemistry of molecular contacts.

Chomsky: No there isn't such a gene. Cells form spheres because that is the least-energy solution ... If particular combinations of proteins and molecules and so on do particular things, that is because of physics and chemistry. ... all of that is presupposing massive amounts of maybe unknown physical and chemical principles, which are leading things in a certain direction, kind of like cell division into spheres. I mean, there may be a couple of genes involved, but fundamentally it is physical principles. (pp. 38-39)."

Behme sums up:

- (ii) "Here the Chomskyan scientist "refutes" an expert not based on work he has completed himself. Instead, he relies on his abductive instinct, telling him that "conceptually it has to be like this" (p. 40), leaving it up to others to figure out the details."

11 Other recent documentations of Chomsky's linguistically oriented dishonesty include Behme (2014a, 2014b), Levine and Postal (2004), Postal (2012, 2014).

12 Especially vile aspects of Chomsky's *Folha de Sao Paulo* interview deserve mention. In it, with no argument or evidence, he refers to Everett as a *charlatan*, this in a venue reaching masses of nonlinguist readers but one which offered Everett no possibility of response. Second, again without justification, he accuses Everett of *hoping* that his readers do not understand a certain point. Thereby, he claims Everett dishonestly asserts things only under a knowingly false assumption about his readers ignorance. Chomsky's outrageous interview remarks reveal a grotesque level of intellectual irresponsibility.

13 A suggestion that Chomsky's avoidance of citing accomplishments was due merely to personal modesty faces an insuperable difficulty. Remarks like the following from a New Yorker interview with Chomsky show that overcoming such a supposed trait has not been an unsurmountable task for him:

(i) Mehta (1971)

"I press my question. 'Who would you say are the leading figures in the field as a whole, anywhere in the world?' 'There aren't any,' he says, with a dismissive wave of the hand."

So, in 1971, the then forty three year old Chomsky dismissively denied that throughout the entire world there was *any* leading figure (implicitly other than himself of course), even in branches of linguistics other than those he worked in.

14 In the third version of this work (Smith and Allott 2016), 1L claim (19a) in the text is reduced in effect to only the part after the colon. But a note refers to Chomsky's statement of it in Chomsky (1991b: 26). Notably, the authors do not there repeat the claim from Smith (2004) that Chomsky has *shown* that 1L holds. However, quote (19b) appears in the newer work on page 335, except that a parenthesized protective hedge *from a suitably objective point of view* is added between *that* and *there is really*.

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