On Chomsky's interpretation of Jespersen

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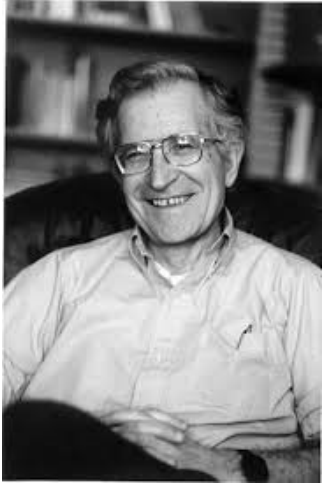
SYNOPSIS

It is known that Noam Chomsky appreciates Jespersen's view on language. At the beginning stage of generative grammar, Chomsky mentioned Jespersen's concept of "nexus", such as the doctor's arrival, as an antecedent of transformational operations. However, tracing back his statements, his appreciation of the distinguished Danish scholar was not always consistent. In late sixties Chomsky sometimes rated Jespersen low and made negative comments about him as one of the "analogy" supporters.

In 1974 Chomsky read a paper at the 50th anniversary of Linguistic Society of America, in which Chomsky re-evaluated Jespersen. Considering that Chomsky mentioned Reynold (1971) in the paper, and that he took it up again in Knowledge of Language (1986), his re-evaluation of Jespersen seems to have come from Reynolds (1971). According to her, many of Jespersen's important assumptions are derived from Wilhelm von Humboldt. Influenced by Reynolds, Chomsky became positive toward Jespersen, especially regarding the concept of "free expressions" which corresponds to Humboldt's "Energeia". Chomsky takes them as the same goal that generative grammar has tried to pursue.

But is it really true that Jespersen's free expressions is what Chomsky conceives it to be? As for Humboldt, Chomsky himself admitted that his interpretation on Humboldt was possibly wrong (see Chomsky 2012). If so, we need to reassess his understanding of Jespersen's "free expressions" in the same way. In this talk, I claim that Chomsky's understanding of this issue comes from his own interpretation.

On Chomsky's interpretation of Jespersen

Noam Chomsky

1928~

Otto Jespersen

1860 ~1943

1. Introduction

Noam Chomsky

Otto Jespersen

"… this research program revived the concerns of a rich tradition, of which perhaps the last major representative was **Otto Jespersen**."

The Minimalist Program (1995: 3)

1. Introduction

Noam Chomsky   Otto Jespersen

Smith (1999: 5) Zellig Harris and Otto Jespersen
Chomsky (2019) 4/29/2019: Chomsky UCLA Lecture 1 (YouTube)

1. Introduction

Noam Chomsky

1928~

W. von Humboldt

1767~1835

Otto Jespersen

1860 ~1943

2. Early stage of Generative Grammar: Late 50's

Noam Chomsky

Otto Jespersen

late 50's = positive

1957 *Syntactic Structures*

Late 50's

Lees (1957)

Review of Chomsky's *Syntactic Structures*, *Language* 33 (1957) 375-408.

FN 19.

'It is difficult when we come to such a combination as <u>an early riser</u>, which it is quite impossible to turn into <u>a riser who is early</u>. Here the adjunct is a shifted subjunct of the verb contained in the substantive <u>riser</u>: <u>he rises</u> (vb) <u>early</u> (adv) = <u>he is an early</u> (adj) <u>riser</u> (sb)' – Otto Jespersen, *A modern English grammar* 2.283 § 12.12.

Late 50's

Chomsky (1958)

Transformational ideas are, of course, an important part of traditional grammar. E.g., O. Jespersen argues, on what we will reconstruct as transformational grounds, that "the doctor's arrival" is different in structure form "the man's house," despite superficial similarity, because of its relation to the sentence "the doctor arrives."

3. Mid 60's

Noam Chomsky

Otto Jespersen

late 50's = positive
mid 60's = negative

1965 *Aspects of the Theory of Syntax*
1966 *Cartesian Linguistics*
Descartes → Port-Royal Grammar etc. → Humboldt

Mid 60's   *Cartesian Linguistics* (1966: 65)

- Modern linguistics has also failed to deal with the Cartesian observations regarding human language in any serious way. **Bloomfield**, for example, observes that in a natural language "the possibilities of combination are practically infinite," so that there is no hope of accounting for language use on the basis of repetition or listing, but he has nothing further to say about the problem beyond the remark that the speaker utters new forms "*on the analogy* of similar forms which he has heard." Similarly, **Hockett** attributes innovation completely to "analogy."   Similar remarks can be found in **Paul**, **Saussure**, **Jespersen**, and many others.

Mid 60's "Topics in the Theory of Generative Grammar"

- The most striking aspect of linguistics competence is what we may call the 'creativity of language', that is, the speaker's ability to produce new sentences, sentences that are immediately understood by other speakers although they bear no physical resemblance to sentences which are 'familiar'. **The fundamental importance to this creative aspect of normal language use** has been recognized since the seventeenth century at least, and it **was at the core of Humboldtian general linguistics**. Modern linguistics, however, is seriously at fault in its failure to come to grips with this central problem.

Mid 60's "Topics in the Theory of Generative Grammar"

- The extent to which this is true has been **seriously underestimated even by those linguists (e.g. O Jespersen.)** who have given some attention to the problem of creativity. This is evident from the common description of language use as a matter of 'grammatical habit' [e.g. O. Jespersen, *Philosophy of Grammar* (London, 1924).

Late 50's ➜ Mid 60's

Noam Chomsky

late 50's = positive
mid 60's = negative

Otto Jespersen

4. 70's and thereafter

Noam Chomsky

late 50's = positive

mid 60's = negative

mid 70's ⎤

present ⎦ positive

Otto Jespersen

Chomsky (1986) *Knowledge of Language*

- Saussurean structuralism had placed Jespersen's observation about "free expressions" outside of the scope of the study of language structure, of Saussure's *langue*. Bloomfield (1933) held that when a speaker produces speech forms that he has not heard, "we say that he utters them *on the analogy* of similar forms which he has heard," a position later adopted by Quine, G.F. Hockett, and the few others who even attempted to deal with the problem.

Chomsky, N. (1974) "Questions of Form and Interpretation." A paper delivered to the LSA on the occasion of its Golden Anniversary Symposium, reprinted in *Linguistic Analysis* (1975) Vol. 1. 75-109.

Noam Chomsky

Otto Jespersen

late 50's = positive

mid 60's = negative

mid 70's ⎤

              ⎬ positive

present ⎦

"Questions of Form and Interpretation,"
the First Golden Anniversary Symposium
of the Linguistic Society of America, 1974.

Chomsky, N. (1974) "Questions of Form and Interpretation." A paper
  delivered to the LSA on the occasion of its Golden Anniversary
Symposium, reprinted in *Linguistic Analysis* (1975) Vol. 1. 75-109.

Noam Chomsky

Otto Jespersen

late 50's =   positive

mid 60's =   negative

mid 70's ⌐

               positive

present ⌐

"Questions of Form and Interpretation,"
  the First Golden Anniversary Symposium
  of the Linguistic Society of America,   1974.

LSA = 1924 = *The Philosophy
of Grammar*

Chomsky (1974) (=1977: 25-6)

For Jespersen, "the essence of language is human activity—activity on the part of one individual to make himself understood by another, and activity on the part of that other to understand what was in the mind of the first."…..

The central concern of the grammarian is free creation, and at a deeper level, the problem of how the structures of a grammar "come into existence in the mind of a speaker" who is not taught grammatical rules "and yet, without any grammatical instruction, from innumerable sentences heard and understood … will abstract some notion of their structure which is definite enough to guide him in framing sentences of his own…"

5. Audrey L. Reynolds

- Audrey L. Reynolds: PhD at North Western University in 1969
  "On Grammatical Trifles: Otto Jespersen and His Linguistic Milieu."

- "What *Did* Otto Jespersen Say?" at the Chicago Linguistic Society (CLS)
  It is published as a paper in the Proceedings of CLS in 1971.

- Judging from the fact that Chomsky did not mention her doctoral thesis in his references, what Chomsky was impressed by might be the CLS paper.

Chomsky (1974)

"In the year of founding of the Linguistic Society of America, Otto Jespersen published an original and provocative investigation ..." [1]

➔ *The Philosophy of Grammar* (1924)

- FN 1

  For perceptive discussion of this and related work of Jespersen's, in a context relevant to the present discussion, see Audrey L. Reynolds, "What *did* Otto Jespersen say?" Papers of the Chicago Linguistic Society 1971.

5. Reynolds (1971)

- Reynolds tries to capture Jespersen's understanding of the three significant concepts ("milestones") in the history of linguistics:

1. diachrony vs. synchrony

2. langue vs. parole

3. the banishing of semantic considerations as a tool of grammatical analysis.

Independence of syntax

- A big argumentation between Chomsky and younger generative grammarians from late 60s to early 70s: Linguistic War.

- Generative Semantics claimed that semantics and syntax generates sentences.

  No boundary between syntax and semantics

  No syntactic level of the deep structure posited in *Aspects* model

➡Chomsky read Raynolds' paper in early 70s, when he might think about criticizing Generative Semantics.

➡Jespersen's approach seems to be the same one Chomsky was pursuing, against the GS.

Chomsky's concerns to Reynolds (1971)

1. Jespersen's attitude toward the relation between syntax   and semantics

2. The relation between Jespersen and Humboldt

#2 Jespersen's respect for Humboldt

 The only descriptive linguist whom he praises lavishly is Wilhelm von Humboldt. In his doctoral dissertation, Jespersen alludes to Humboldt. In "Energetik der Sparche" (1914), Humboldt is credited with making the most intelligent comment ever made by any 19th century linguist – that language was not a finished product but an activity...

Humboldt was clearly Jespersen's acknowledged mentor; and Jespersen's responses to the various issues which we have considered were clearly prompted by his Humboldtian assumptions about language. (Reynolds 524)

6. Jespersen's Free Expressions and "infinite generation"

- The central concern of the grammarian is free creation, and at a deeper level, the problem of how the structures of a grammar "come into existence in the mind of a speaker" who is not taught grammatical rules "and yet, without any grammatical instruction, from innumerable sentences heard and understood … will abstract some notion of their structure which is definite enough to guide him in framing sentences of his own…" (Chomsky（1975: 26)）

Chomsky on Jespersen's "Free Expressions"

Humboldt : Creative aspect of language use

              (= Chomsky's Infinite generation)

Jespersen: **Free expressions**

Three reasons for Chomsky to support Jespersen

1. Independence of syntactic component

2. Language as an activity, not a finished product

   ⬅ Humboldt

3. Free expressions = Creative aspect of language use

7. Chomksy's confession (2012: 63)

In *The Science of Language: Interviews with James McGilvary* (2012), Chomsky admitted that his interpretation about Humboldt was misleading.

Chomksy (2012: 63)

In fact, almost all the time, when he (=Humboldt) talks about infinite use of finite means, he doesn't mean what we mean – infinite generation –he means use; so, it's part of your life.

▪ ▪ ▪ I think now that the way I and others who have quoted him has been a bit misleading, in that it sounds as if he's a precursor of generative grammar, where perhaps instead he's really a precursor of the study of language use as being unbounded, creative, and so on.

Weydt (1976)

• Harold Weydt (1976: 57) pointed out that what Humboldt claimed is unlimited expressive power of language, but Chomsky misinterprets Humboldt's ideas in terms of syntactic mechanism.

"Nur das ist festzustellen, dass hier keine Uebereinstimmung zwischen beiden Autoren herrscht"

   (cf. Webelhuth (1986: 80-1))

Chomsky (1966) : FN 37 in *Cartesian Linguistics*

Wilhelm von Humboldt observed that language is a system that provides for infinite use of finite means. …. <u>With a bit of interpretive license</u>, we might understand him to be saying that a language is a generative procedure that enables articulated, structured expressions of thought to be freely produced and understood. Notice there is interpretive license in this account.

PG (1924: 29)

- My chief object in writing this chapter has been to make the reader realize that language is ... a set of habits, of habitual actions, and that each word and each sentence spoken is a complex action on the part of the speaker. The greater part of these actions are determined by what he has done previously in similar situations, and that again was determined chiefly by what he had habitually heard from others. But in each individual instance, apart from mere formulas, the speaker has to turn these habits to account to meet a new situation, to express what has not been expressed previously in every minute detail;...

Jespersen (1924) "The Teaching of Grammar"

- … free expressions can be changed according to circumstances: you can say "I gave the girl a shilling" or "he will give his wife a new hat," etc. You may take any word out of a free expression and substitute another one. And there the activity, the language-creating activity, of the individual, comes in. Jespersen (1924: 541)

8. Two Discrepancies between Chomsky and Jespersen

#1. Jespersen's ambivalent approach to grammar

#2. universal grammar

Two Discrepancies between Chomsky and Jespersen

#1. Jespersen's ambivalent approach

Jespersen, I suppose, did not have the impression that there was something fundamental missing in his presentation, despite his recognition of the importance of what he called "free expressions."
Chomsky (1979:109)

Two Discrepancies between Chomsky and Jespersen

#2. universal grammar

- Chomsky: infinite generation   UG
             (syntax mechanism)   deductive

- Jespersen: free expressions   universal grammar
               (grammatical patterns)   inductive
               examples and exceptions

Two Discrepancies between Chomsky and Jespersen

#2. universal grammar

"Humboldt is opposed to the idea of 'general' or 'universal' grammar as understood in his time; instead of this purely deductive grammar he would found an inductive general grammar, based upon the comparison of the different ways in which the same grammatical notion was actually expressed in a variety of languages."   *Language* p. 59

9. Conclusion

- Chomsky's high evaluation on Jespersen came form his own interpretation of "free expressions," based on his understanding of Humboldt.

- As Chomsky mistakenly understood Humboldt's idea, we should give a second thought to his interpretation of Jespersen's free expressions.

- Once we take "free expressions" as not what Chomsky did, we can see that Jespersen is a consistent scholar, and that Jespersen's understanding of universal grammar is different from Chomsky's.

On Chomsky's interpretation of Jespersen

Thank you for listening!

Naoyuki AKASO

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