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The Conversation

“The paradox of Noam Chomsky on language and power”

In his recent speech accepting the Sydney Peace Prize, Chomsky returned to a recurrent theme from his work in political science: that the violence perpetrated by the West is not represented in our media or political discourse in the same way as the violence of “rogue” states.

In his well known book Manufacturing Consent: The Political Economy of the Mass Media, published in 1988 and co-authored with Edward Herman, Chomsky argued that the media “serve, and propagandise on behalf of, the powerful societal interests that control and finance them”.

These powerful interests “play a key role in fixing basic principles and the dominant ideologies” because the media, on their behalf, “fix the premises of discourse”, creating a dichotomisation, “as if a commissar had instructed the media” to “concentrate on the victims of enemy powers and forget about the victims of friends”.

This dichotomisation is “massive and systematic”, and prevents “mass deliberation and expression”.

Thus, public opinion is “managed”, and the violence by which the US and other Western powers pursue their foreign interests is hidden, validated, normalised.

For instance, the mainstream American press, Herman and Chomsky argued, completely failed to see that the invasion of Vietnam was an act of American aggression. Indeed, the very idea of “American aggression” was completely “unthinkable”.

Consequently, America was represented in the mainstream American media as “defending” rather than “attacking” south Vietnam, despite the large-scale bombardment of the south by the US.

The argument of the book is very persuasive. It gives a central role to propaganda in explaining how it is that the US and her allies have both “might” and “right”.

It gives a central role to discourse as the vehicle of ideology, as the medium for the shaping of public opinion, and as a mechanism for reinforcing the contradictions and inequities of social structure.

But, paradoxically, Chomsky see no role for linguistics in understanding how language can have such power. In accruing evidence for the claims for his analysis of the media, Chomsky has never recruited a single concept from linguistics.

In fact, in an 800 page book of interviews with Chomsky, titled Language and Politics, Chomsky – ironically – explicitly rejects the idea that language might be implicated in politics.

He goes on to reject any role for language in propaganda. And despite believing that ideology is extremely powerful in subjugating dissent, Chomsky argues that in the face of "very effective systems of indoctrination and thought control" all one needs is common sense and a few facts, eschewing any notion that his own discipline might provide some expertise for the analysis or deconstruction of an ideology.

But to consider linguistics relevant to the study of ideology, Chomsky would have had to reject his own linguistic theory, in which language is genetically endowed universal structure, the study of which does not require the linguist to deal with the actuality of what people do with language.

For Chomsky, meaning is peripheral to linguistic form, a notion so preposterous it is hard to square it with the 20th century's most famous linguist.

As Emeritus Professor of Linguistics Michael Halliday has argued, "imaginary problems were created by the whole series of dichotomies that Chomsky introduced, or took over unproblematized: not only syntax/semantics but also grammar/lexis, language/thought, competence/performance…Once these dichotomies had been set up, the problem arose of locating and maintaining the boundaries between them".

Chomsky's theory has been dismissed by leading neurobiologists, such as Gerald Edelman and Terrence Deacon and rejected by language typologists (for instance, Nicholas Evans and Stephen Levinson, whose 2009 article in Behavioural and Brain Sciences journal argues that his claims of Universal Grammar are "either empirically false, unfalsifiable, or misleading").

But while on his trip down under, Chomsky did not fail to keep alive the "founding father" narrative so familiar now in the "Chomsky revolution" mythology. When interviewed on the ABC's Late Night Live program after giving his speech, Chomsky (re)told the tale of how he rescued linguistics from its misguided state, by, for instance, insisting on a biological basis for language.

Only a woeful or negligent reading of his predecessors could lead him to think he had "discovered" this idea.

What despairs me most about Chomsky's work is not that it is predicated on ignoring decades of field work by great linguists in America, such as Franz Boas, Edward Sapir, or Benjamin Lee Whorf, or that it tendentiously decrees what is required for linguistics to be a "serious discipline", or that it requires a serious misreading of the contribution of Ferdinand de Saussure to our understanding of semiotics.

It is that he has turned the mainstream of linguistics into an arcane form of knowledge, truly the preserve of navel-gazing academics.

By Chomsky's own dicta, the discourse produced by humans in naturally occurring situations (dismissed and diminished as "performance") was banished from the scope of the discipline.

One very serious consequence of Chomsky's dominance in the latter part of the 20th century is that the linguistic analysis of real language, in real contexts of human interaction, has been marginalised in North America, and in the places to which Chomskyan linguistics has been exported.

This means, among other things, that the ideologies on which America's "permanent war economy" rest have not be subject to the kind of serious, systematic, and empirical analysis befitting such powerful and consequential ways of seeing the world.

Given the thrust of his speech at Sydney's Town Hall, this is truly paradoxical.