

Biographical Sketch

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As the synoptic introduction makes clear, Noam Chomsky is a unique intellectual figure who has had a huge impact on several fields. He was almost single-handedly responsible for initiating the cognitive revolution in linguistics, and, with others such as George Miller, Hilary Putnam and Jerry Fodor, for the ensuing replacement of behaviorism by cognitive science in psychology generally, to say nothing of being a leading critic of American foreign policy since the American war in Vietnam.

Chomsky has always been a rather private person, writing “I’m really a hermit by nature, and would much prefer to be alone working than to be in public” (quoted in Falk 1994, 597, n.1). Nevertheless, aspects of his personal life and education, especially up to his appointment to MIT in his mid-twenties, are illuminating of the origins of his future work and political engagement.

Here we try to summarize some of the main biographical facts about Chomsky’s life. It is impossible to do full justice to the milieu that have influenced Chomsky and that he has shaped in such in a short sketch. Interested readers should consult Barsky (1998, 2011) and Chomsky (1987, 2009) for much more detail.

Avram Noam Chomsky was born on December 7, 1928 in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania. His parents were born in the Russian empire (in what are now Ukraine and Belarus), but met in the US. His father, William Chomsky, was a scholar and teacher of Hebrew and wrote a seminal book on the history of the Hebrew language. His mother, Elsie Chomsky (née Simonofsky), was also a Hebraist and educator. They taught and had leadership roles at Gratz College, which was both a teacher training college and a center for academic study of Judaism. (For discussion of the significant influence Chomsky’s parents had on his thinking, see Barsky 1998, 9-14.)

Chomsky lived in Philadelphia until he moved to Boston in 1951. From the age of about two to eleven, he attended a progressive Deweyite school run by Temple University, a school that emphasized creativity and encouraged students to pursue their own interests. He was already becoming intensely interested in politics. He describes himself as “a child of the Depression” with vivid early memories “of people selling rags at my door, of violent police strikebreaking, and other Depression scenes” (Chomsky 1987). He was also affected by international events, particularly the Spanish civil war. At the age of ten, he wrote his first article, an editorial for his school newspaper on the fall of Republican Barcelona to Franco’s forces.

Chomsky then went on to attend the Central High School in Philadelphia, a mainstream academically-oriented school which he found competitive and unpleasant: “I remember virtually nothing about high school [...] apart from the emotional tone, which was quite negative” (Chomsky 1987; see also Chomsky 2009; Peck 1987, 5-6). Chomsky recalls that at

this time he was influenced by members of his extended family and their political environment, more working class and left wing than his parents. From the age of 13 he would travel on his own to New York, where an uncle ran a newsstand “which was sort of a radical center. We’d hang out all night and have discussions and arguments” (Chomsky 1987; see also McGilvray 2009).

In 1945, at the age of sixteen, Chomsky enrolled at the University of Pennsylvania, paying for his education by teaching Hebrew in the evenings and on Sundays. At the beginning he found the structure stifling and the classes largely uninteresting: the exceptions were courses on Arabic and a freshman course in philosophy. He was planning to drop out after two years to pursue his political interests (Chomsky 1987; Barsky 1998, 47).

However, in 1947 those political interests led to Chomsky getting to know Zellig Harris: they were both radical left-wing Zionists. But Harris was also one of the most important linguistic structuralists in the United States, and he was working on what became his most influential contribution: *Methods in Structural Linguistics*, completed in 1947 (but published as Harris, 1951). Harris gave Chomsky the proofs to read and Chomsky decided to go on with linguistics. On Harris’ recommendation, Chomsky took seminars with the philosopher Nelson Goodman, with whom he became close friends, as well as courses with the philosophers Morton White, Richard Martin and Henry Hiz, and the mathematician Nathan Fine (Chomsky 1983). Chomsky received his BA from the University of Pennsylvania in 1949, having written an undergraduate thesis on the morphophonemics of Hebrew, which already included key elements of what was to become generative grammar. (He extended and revised this as his master’s thesis in 1951.)

Also in 1949, Chomsky married Carol Schatz, a fellow student at the University of Pennsylvania. They came from the same community in Philadelphia – her mother worked at Gratz College – and they had first met as young children. They remained happily married until her death in 2008. They had three children: Aviva (born 1957), Diane (1960), and Harry (1967). In the 1960s, when Chomsky was involved in political demonstrations and resistance activities and at risk of being jailed, Carol Chomsky went back to university to get a doctorate, anticipating that she would need to be the breadwinner for the family. She made important contributions to the understanding of language acquisition in children (e.g. C. Chomsky, 1969), working from 1972 at the Harvard Graduate School of Education.

The Chomskys moved to Boston in 1951, Noam having become, on Goodman’s advice and recommendation, a Junior Fellow of the Harvard Society of Fellows: “the first time I could devote myself to study and research without working on the side” (Chomsky 1987). During the four years at Harvard (with a period abroad on a socialist kibbutz in Israel for about six weeks in 1953), he got to know graduate students Morris Halle and Eric Lenneberg, as well as the noted linguist Roman Jakobson and the philosophers W.V.O. Quine and J.L. Austin (who visited Harvard in 1955). Chomsky pursued his own approach to linguistics, appealing to abstract structure in accounting for linguistic patterns: a massive break with Zellig Harris’ theory.

Chomsky was awarded his Ph.D. from the University of Pennsylvania in 1955 based on only one chapter of his thesis, a ca. 500pp ms. that came to be widely circulated in mimeograph, *The Logical Structure of Linguistic Theory* (finally published in slightly revised form in 1975). The manuscript was highly influential, in particular for the more technical and formal aspects of the new approach to language that Chomsky was developing.

After the years at Harvard, in 1955, on the recommendation of Jakobsen, Chomsky joined MIT as an assistant professor (Barsky 1998, 86). He was in theory supposed to work on a machine translation project in the MIT Research Laboratory of Electronics, but that never happened. Instead he worked on what became *Syntactic Structures*, and taught undergraduate philosophy courses, among others. In 1961, he was promoted to full professor of Foreign Languages and Linguistics, and then appointed Ferrari Ward Professor of Linguistics in 1966. In 1976 he was appointed Institute Professor, the highest honor MIT bestows upon a faculty member. After his official retirement in 2002, he continued to work and serve the MIT community until the fall of 2017.

In the late 1950s, Chomsky's work had begun to receive some recognition; he was invited to major conferences, and people started to become familiar with some of his revolutionary ideas. His name became significantly more visible as a result of his 1959 review of B. F. Skinner (see the synoptic introduction). With his attack on behaviorism, he became one of the preeminent figures in what later became known as the "cognitive revolution," and his fame within the field of linguistics continued to grow.

From the mid 1960s, Chomsky became increasingly engaged in political activities. A significant turning point came in February 1967 with the publication of "The Responsibility of Intellectuals" in the *New York Review of Books*. With this essay, he emerged as a leading critic of the war in Vietnam (for appraisal of its significance, see Allott 2019; Parini 2017), and since then, he has been a highly visible public intellectual, known in particular for his critique of American foreign policy and his work with Edward Herman on the role of the mass media in democracies in 'manufacturing consent'¹.

Since the 1960s, Chomsky has published prodigiously on both linguistics and politics. His work in syntax has revolutionized the field several times, but it has always explored the implications of studying grammar in the way that he set out in the 1950s and early 60s, as a generative mental system, largely innately specified. For several decades he traveled the world nearly continuously and he has given countless public and specialized talks to all sorts of audiences.

Chomsky has been awarded more than 40 honorary degrees. In 1988, he received the Kyoto Prize for Basic Sciences, created in 1984 to recognize work in areas not included among the Nobel Prizes. Other awards include the Benjamin Franklin Medal, the Leonard Euler Medal, the Erich Fromm Prize, and the Necklace of the Order of Timor-Leste. He is also a fellow of the American Academy of Arts and Sciences, the National Academy of Science, the British Academy, the American Philosophical Society, the American Psychological Society, and the Linguistic Society of America.

In 2014, Chomsky married Luisa Valéria Galvão-Wasserman, a translator for the Institute of Advanced Studies (IEA) of the University of São Paulo, Brazil. Since the fall of 2017, they have lived in Tucson, Arizona, where Chomsky was appointed a laureate professor in linguistics at the University of Arizona and also holds the title of Agnese Helms Haury Chair in the Agnese Helms Haury Program in Environmental and Social Justice. In his 92nd year, he still teaches courses on linguistics and on issues relating to his political activist work.

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¹ On the motivation for Chomsky's political work, John Horgan writes: "I once asked Chomsky which work he found more satisfying, his political activism or his linguistic

research. He seemed surprised that I needed to ask. Obviously, he replied, he spoke out against injustice merely out of a sense of duty; he took no intellectual pleasure from it. If the world's problems suddenly disappeared, he would happily, joyfully, devote himself to the pursuit of knowledge for its own sake." (Horgan 2016)