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LANGUAGE AND FREEDOM
(1970)

When I was invited to speak on the topic "language and freedom," I was puzzled and intrigued. Most of my professional life has been devoted to the study of language. There would be no great difficulty in finding a topic to discuss in that domain. And there is much to say about the problems of freedom and liberation as they pose themselves to us and to others in the mid-twentieth century. What is troublesome in the title of this lecture is the conjunction. In what way are language and freedom to be interconnected?

As a preliminary, let me say just a word about the contemporary study of language, as I see it. There are many aspects of language and language use that raise intriguing questions, but—in my judgment—only a few have so far led to productive theoretical work. In particular, our deepest insights are in the area of formal grammatical structure. A person who knows a language has acquired a system of rules and principles—a "generative grammar," in technical terms—that associates sound and meaning in some specific fashion. There are many reasonably well-founded and, I think, rather enlightening hypotheses as to the character of such grammars, for quite a number of languages. Furthermore, there has been a renewal of interest in "universal grammar," interpreted now as the theory that tries to specify the general properties of these languages that can be learned in the normal way by humans. Here too, significant progress has been achieved. The subject is of particular importance. It is appropriate to regard universal grammar as the study of one of the essential faculties of mind. It is, therefore, extremely interesting to discover, as I believe we do, that the principles of universal grammar are rich, abstract, and restrictive, and can be used to construct principled explanations for a variety of phenomena. At the present stage of our understanding, if language is to provide a springboard for the investigation of other problems of man, it is these aspects of language to which we will have to turn our attention, for the simple reason that it is only these aspects that are reasonably well understood. In another sense, the study of formal properties of language reveals something of the nature of man in a negative way: it underscores, with great clarity, the limits of our understanding of those qualities of mind that are apparently unique to man and that must enter into his cultural achievements in an intimate, if still quite obscure manner.

In searching for a point of departure, one turns naturally to a period in the history of Western thought when it was possible to believe that "the thought of making freedom the sum and substance of philosophy has emancipated the

Noam Chomsky
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