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Assignment 2

In his interview, Chomsky dismisses much of sociolinguistic research as being “evident” and “banal”, characterizing many of the conclusions as common knowledge. He approaches sociolinguistics from the point of view of someone who is already in the field of linguistics—thus, for him, the legitimacy of a variety such as African-American English, and the knowledge that such a variety has its own grammar, is something that Chomsky takes for granted, and is an assumption that he utilizes when he dismisses sociolinguistics. He thus criticizes sociolinguistics as a field that “takes no sophistication in linguistics to establish the socially relevant conclusion” (*Language and Responsibility* 55), and, as we have mentioned in class, Chomsky lumps his work in political science as being under the same category. Chomsky does not characterize himself as a person with any background in political science, and Chomsky believes that to produce work and analysis regarding political science does not require any special training.

While Chomsky is being consistent within his own conception of linguistics, sociolinguistics, sociology, and political science, he nonetheless holds an incorrect viewpoint. His assumption is that sociolinguistic research does not require specialized training in the same way that theoretical linguistic research does. However, that view is questionable. Sociolinguistics does encompass a broad spectrum of various subfields, ranging from theoretically-based sociolinguistics to such subfields as ethnographic linguistics. Phonetics and phonology within sociolinguistics, for instance, require highly specialized training; Chomsky most likely would not dismiss either phonetics or phonology as a valid linguistic field. He appears to have a misguided idea of what sociolinguistics is all about, and his misconception of the field colors his views toward it.

Similarly, we may wonder if Chomsky also has a misguided understanding of political science as a

field, and whether this field that he would most likely find very similar to sociology and sociolinguistics is actually closer to a theoretical discipline than he may have initially thought. It may be the case that the division between the disciplines is more illusory than Chomsky believes and that he is thus being inconsistent.

Chomsky asserts that, in order to be theoretically interesting, a phenomenon must be valuable not in the phenomenon itself, but rather in its implications for broader theories. For instance, in theoretical linguistics, it is not the specific utterances that are interesting; in fact, a number of utterances that are crucial for theoretical linguistics are never uttered in everyday conversation. Rather, it is what the utterance implies for theories: that **John seems to the men to like each other* is ungrammatical allows us to generate theories of constraints on syntax or on lexical items. However, in a hobby like butterfly collecting, it is the individual butterflies themselves—each phenomenon—that are interesting, and there is no attempt to generate a broader theory of understanding. (On the other hand, if the intent of butterfly collecting is to gather specimen to support a general theory of flight, then butterfly collecting may escape Chomsky’s description of frivolous “interesting” and into a more theoretical—and thus “valid”—kind of “interesting”.)

With this quality of theoretical interest in mind, then, Chomsky’s exploration of media and propaganda and his understanding of what his work is may not be inconsistent with his notions of theoretical interest. With regards to *Manufacturing Consent*, Chomsky is primarily interested in observing and understanding the specific phenomenon of media and media control. However, while Chomsky focuses on media and media control, he does not—at least, not within the context of the preface—appear to connect media and media control to any larger theory. That is, Chomsky does not contextualize his arguments within a broader theoretical context of understanding power. With that said, then, *Manufacturing Consent* may simply be an example of very elaborate butterfly collecting. With *Manufacturing Consent*, Chomsky is interested in a specific specimen and does not appear to be interested in understanding or exploring any broader system within which the specimen is found.

However, the second criterion that Chomsky provides to judge the legitimacy of research is that of *explanation*: For something to be research, it must be able to provide an explanatory principle for a subject, a theory behind it. The introduction of *Manufacturing Consent* begins with the sentence, “This book centers on what we call a ‘propaganda model,’ an analytical framework that attempts to *explain* the performance of the U.S. media in terms of the basic institutional structures and relationships within which they operate.” (*Manufacturing Consent* xi, emphasis added) In this book, then, Chomsky formulates a theory with *explanatory power* about a specific phenomenon: he strives to explain the mechanisms of the institutional system and to contextualize media within that system. By doing so, he hopes to explain how and why U.S. media behaves the way it does.

Chomsky himself even presented his model as something that has explanatory power. Unless Chomsky is using a specialized definition of “explanatory principles”, then his explicit presentation of his analytical model as having explanatory power over the behavior of U.S. media definitely shows inconsistency with his own viewpoint. He is not simply providing a set of “observations, intuitions, impressions, [and] some valid generalizations” (*Language and Responsibility* 56), which he states are characteristics of sociology and similar humanities-oriented fields; he is specifically presenting this model as something that goes beyond just observations and into the realm of having explanatory power.

Furthermore, in *Language and Responsibility*, Chomsky notes that, for research to be relevant, it must bear some kind of relation to theoretical principles. I argued above that Chomsky’s work in political science—or, at least, in this particular book—does not specifically orient itself as part of a collective effort toward a broader theory of something like power, which partially disqualifies *Manufacturing Consent* from being “research”. However, Chomsky’s political writing is not context-free and is not devoid of theory and theoretical models within itself: Chomsky must have some sort of base from which he is drawing his ideas and his analysis, some school of thought that he adheres to or has a hand in shaping. With that in mind, it is also possible to view Chomsky’s work as still having some sort of research value, in that his findings may still contribute to or challenge theoretical

principles within larger schools of thought, such as Marxism.

It is clear, then, that Chomsky is at least being partially inconsistent. However, it is difficult to determine the extent of his inconsistency. This difficulty is made worse by the fact that Chomsky does not explicitly define what he means by “explanatory principles”. He seems to believe that sociology, literary criticism, sociolinguistics, etc. are unable to explain why something is the way it is (and instead are purely descriptive), which is clearly not the case—all those fields have rich explanatory power and varieties of rigid theories. Or perhaps Chomsky sees “explanatory principles” as something that has the ability to predict, rather than just to produce post-hoc explanations; while literary criticism may be able to explain a work after it is created, it may have less success with predicting the nature of works given a certain set of constraints. However, sociolinguistics *does*, in many cases, have predictive power—again, this mismatch may be because Chomsky has a misguided idea of what sociolinguistic research is and what the principles of sociolinguistics are.