

15 Questions in A Dialogue with Noam Chomsky

Question 1 Joint research of linguists and experts from other fields (Biology, Physics, etc.) should help us understand the Faculty of Language better. However, in practice such cooperation seems not to be feasible, for various reasons. Do you think that relevant questions about the Faculty of Language can still be asked and pursued with the theoretical tools that have been used in Generative Grammar? This question is perhaps particularly relevant for young linguists.

Question 2 Interdisciplinary approaches seem to be necessary these days. In such context, much theoretical research takes into account psycho and neurolinguistic experiments, and other types of evidence. This brings back the possibility to incorporate usage-based approaches to language, with tools (statistical analyses, corpus-based research, etc.) that are not always backed up with theoretically sound research questions. What is your perspective on this matter?

Question 3 Isn't a more parsimonious (and more biologically sound) hypothesis to suggest that language, qua organ, may be a variational modality, in the sense of Wagner (2014), of some already existing organ, with homologues in other, extinct or extant species, possibly serving different functions from communication (or thought)?

Question 4 What do you think about the Cartographic Project? To what extent is it compatible with your views?

Question 5 What is the place of optionality in grammar and its interaction with interface conditions imposed by pragmatic and semantic principles?

Question 6 Traditionally, much research has focused on locality constraints, but some linguistic phenomena show that globality is also relevant in accounting for certain phenomena. How can this tension be solved?

Question 7 What is the place of acceptability judgments in linguistic theory and how do they relate to linguistic variation? How can we explain the fact that phonological and morphological factors (e.g., prosody, resumptive pronouns, ellipsis), may ameliorate some syntactic violations?

Question 8 In the current version of the Minimalist Program, what are the theory-internal restrictions that make it falsifiable?

Question 9 Wiltschko 2014 has argued that a universal categorial specification (i.e. universal labeling) is impossible because languages may differ with respect to the categories/labels/unit types they express. Wiltschko proposes instead that UG should be conceived as conforming only to a category-neutral hierarchical spine. Can you comment on the plausibility of a conception along these lines? It may appear to conform to minimalist desiderata, but it raises a number of questions about the learnability of a system where categorization is unrestricted (grammatical categories are assumed to be language-specific) and where the division between functional and lexical elements is blurred.

Question 10 Concerning ellipsis and its place in grammar, a very widespread view contends that ellipsis is syntactic in nature, whereas some others, including work of yourself with Howard Lasnik back in the 90s argue that ellipsis should be regarded as a (radical) case of deaccentuation, thus placing ellipsis at the PF side of the grammar. How positive do you feel about the syntactic view of ellipsis?

Question 11 What is your opinion on the application of minimalism to the acquisition of non-native languages?

Question 12 Assuming some version of Phase Theory, how does the system proceed to assemble the different pieces of a derivation, a process that is needed by PF [Phonetic Form] and LF [Logical Form]?

Question 13 Are there reasons to maintain the PIC [Phase Impenetrability Condition] as an independent condition or could it just be derived from cyclic Spell-out of phase complements?

Question 14 What are the problems, empirical and conceptual, of the proliferation of phases (say, beyond C, v, D), and in particular the postulation of phases within the word?

Question 15 David Hilbert famously came up with several fundamental problems for mathematics in 1900, which he presented in the International Congress of Mathematicians at the Sorbonne. What would you say are today's problems for linguistics as you understand it—and do you see any avenues for research into them? They don't have to be 23 as conceived by Hilbert or even 10 as he presented in the congress. But it would be good if they are serious and, in your opinion, solvable (not mysteries).