Minimalism is functionalism

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Abstract

Noam Chomsky's most recent research paradigm, the Minimalist Program (MP), overtly proclaims continuity with earlier phases of transformational-generative linguistics. Despite its (limited) use of terminology from these earlier phases and its continued focus on many of the same issues with which Chomsky and his followers have always been concerned, at a conceptual level MP represents a dramatic break with earlier generative theories. MP adopts many of the assumptions and goals of the linguistic research projects that emerged before, alongside, and contrary to Chomsky's own, the ones which have come in the linguistic literature to be called functionalism. While this shift has had significant consequences in linguistics, in part driving convergences between functionalist and formalist approaches, its consequences have yet to be fully realized in fields like philosophy and cognitive science that have based many foundational assumptions on just those aspects of generativism now challenged by Chomsky's own theory.
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1. Introduction[1]

Since the mid-1990s, Noam Chomsky's work on linguistics has taken a conceptual turn whose full consequences inside and outside of the field have only started to become clear. Because Chomsky repeatedly writes that this turn, which he calls the Minimalist Program (MP; see Chomsky (1995, 1998, 2001, 2004, 2005a, 2007, 2008)), maintains the spirit of the transformational-generative (TG) program he inaugurated in the 1950s, researchers (especially Chomskyans) have emphasized the many visible continuities between MP and other

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generative frameworks. Granted these continuities, though, MP diverges in significant ways from other formulations of generative linguistics. Indeed, surprisingly, but as Chomsky has recently stated explicitly, MP is *not* directly a search for the nature of Universal Grammar (UG), the hallmark of his pre-MP programs, but instead ''approaches UG from below'' (Chomsky, 2007), searching for those aspects of the language faculty that come into being by dint of ''virtual conceptual necessity'' (of which Postal (2003), among others, is highly skeptical) and other *non*-linguistic factors, and thereby revealing the contents of UG largely by determining what is left over when these non-linguistic factors are ruled out.

Contrary to other generative programs, then, a major part of the point of MP is to investigate those aspects of language that do *not* require what were previously understood as innate linguistic mechanisms for their realization, but instead those which result purely from the shape of any putative interaction between two other aspects of the human mind whose existence is for Chomsky undeniable: the Conceptual–Intentional (CI) system, and the Sensory-Motor (SM) system. That is to say that MP investigates not just UG but also those aspects of human language that can be accounted for solely on the basis of the needs for transferring CI system objects into SM (and vice versa)—in other words, for speaking one's thoughts aloud, and for understanding the thoughts of other people through their language (whether that language is spoken, signed, or conveyed via another means).[2] While there is no doubt that language-specific mechanisms remain of real interest to Chomskyans, the guiding methodology of MP is to proceed as if very few such mechanisms exist: 'how little can be attributed to UG while still accounting for the variety of I-languages attained,' Chomsky (2007, p. 3) asks, where I-language remains, as it has been throughout much of the history of TG, the technical term for that part of language processed by the individual's language faculty.

The technical language in which Chomsky has expressed MP has lead some to mistakenly see there principally a renewed investigation of UG, and there is a nominal sense in which this is true, but Chomsky is now clear that UG instead must be a list of 'exceptions' to what he calls the Strong Minimalist Thesis (SMT), those aspects of language necessitated by the SM–CI interface and by what Chomsky calls ''virtual conceptual necessity.'' Ideally, Chomsky writes, there would be nothing in UG at all—in this case language would be 'perfectly designed,' without 'exceptions,' and somehow, perhaps, perfectly reflective of the semantic operations of CI (since one view is that pure SM operations lack meaning unless assigned by some means to CI functions; see Culicover and Jackendoff (2005, pp. 94–102), on this aspect of the conceptual entailments of TG remaining in MP).[3] While much of the work in MP recasts familiar features of TG such as crossover effects, C-command, *wh*-extraction, and so on, in terms of what he calls external *Merge* and internal Merge (i.e., *Move*), Chomsky is at pains to point out that unlike in previous work, Merge might be *all there is* in UG, with almost all of what had previously been thought of as the contents of UG now implemented in other (more general) cognitive structures, especially conditions imposed by interactions between CI and SM.

Thus despite the desire to recast what had been operations of UG in terms of MP, Chomsky's program has undergone a radical change. The idea that language consists *largely* of the necessary connections between whatever we call thought and the biological pressures of speaking/signing, along with minimal language-specific mechanisms, is a hallmark of a much wider range of thinkers than those with whom Chomsky is usually associated. In some forms, it can be found in thinkers as varied as Kant, Hume, Husserl, Bergson, Heidegger, Wittgenstein, Hilary Putnam, W.V. Quine, and even poststructuralists like Jacques Derrida—in general, all thinkers from whom Chomsky has been at pains to distinguish himself, precisely because of their linguistic views. This is of particular interest perhaps not primarily because of Chomsky's linguistic work, but because of the general impact of Chomsky's views on fields like philosophy and cognitive science, where much work still depends on the part of Chomsky's work that underwrites the picture of a highly structured rule-based UG—which MP dispenses with almost completely (a movement which had already been underway, arguably, in Chomsky's programs of the 1980s). In its conceptual entailments, MP is also remarkably close to the perspectives offered by Chomsky's most prominent theoretical opponents in linguistics, today usually referred to as *functionalists* (see Butler (2003, 2005a,b, 2006), Bybee (2006), Newmeyer (1998, 2003, 2005)). In the remainder of this discussion, what is at issue is not the accuracy of MP, or of functionalism for that matter—indeed, I

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[2] Burton-Roberts and Poole (2006) is a strong critique of the basic CI/SM split in terms of a straightforward mapping of sound to meaning, which they argue Chomsky carries over too uncritically from Saussure.

[3] See Chomsky (2005a,b).