



Laudation for Noam Chomsky

Peter Zudeick

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Copyright © 2010 by Dr. Peter Zudeick, Tulpenfeld 7, 53113 Bonn, E-Mail: p.zudeick[at-symbol]t-online.de - **Translated** by Amanda Kahrsch, Department of English Linguistics (IFLA), University of Stuttgart

I can no longer remember the exact moment, but it must have been around 1965 or 1966. I was studying for my Abitur – the exams to qualify for university admission – and I had applied for a study abroad in the USA with the Fulbright Commission. Several tests had to be taken, and there were many candidates, and I was among the final ten or twelve under consideration for the two or three Fulbright scholarships available. One had to choose three US universities in which one would like to spend an academic year. Among others, I chose the Massachusetts Institute of Technology and, when I was asked, said that it was my first choice. Why? A technical university when I was geared more towards liberal arts and humanities? Yes, because there Noam Chomsky, professor for Linguistics and Philosophy, is based, and he had developed an interesting theory. My philosophy teacher in school had mentioned him, drawing my attention. Really? The men from the commission – three Americans, two Germans – knew nothing about this. Instead they wanted to know what it was I found interesting about linguistics and why – alongside philosophy – I wanted to study German. I replied that I not only found the structure of language interesting, but also the history of language. In German I was particularly interested in the origins of German from Gothic through Old- and Middle High German. The literature, too, interested me, with the oral tradition manifesting itself in written literature, finding its expression and survival in fairy tales, sagas, and songs. Ah! That was exactly what Hit-

ler and the Nazis were trying to do: emphasize the Germanic. I gazed at them sheepishly and was stunned: All I could do was stammer and ask what the ahistoric Germanic cult tradition and the history of language and literature had to do with Adolf Hitler. The men smiled benignly, indulgently, sympathetically. I failed. I did not go to Cambridge and I did not come into contact with Noam Chomsky.

This came to pass in another way. In 1967 I began my studies in Cologne. One of the young lecturers in German, who usually gave proseminars in Gothic, Old High German and Middle High German, was offering a seminar in modern linguistics. This was new territory for me. This is not to say that I had never heard of Structuralism, of Saussure, of the Copenhagen School, the Prague School. General linguistics had always been there: even in Cologne there was an Institute for Linguistics and there were Structuralists like Hansjakob Seiler or Harald Weinrich or Manfred Bierwisch in the GDR. But they tended to keep to themselves. Significantly, the early work of German linguists was written largely in English; the scientific community was Anglo-American. Linguistics as a field was not yet fashionable in Germany; that was just beginning. The push in modern linguistics coming from the USA from the 1950s on had not yet registered in Germany, at least not in university instruction. “Modern linguistics is now gaining a foothold in German universities,” began the foreword to an introductory textbook in linguistics written in 1970. We were earlier.



Without really realizing what we were getting ourselves into, this was all exciting at first. This was not hermeneutic German studies, with its empathetic understanding of what takes hold of us – the bourgeois parody of philology from the 1950s. Understanding structures promised far greater clarity. And so we read texts that had not yet appeared in German: for instance texts by Uriel Weinreich, Jerrold J. Katz, and Noam Chomsky. *Aspects of the Theory of Syntax* came to us in a pirated copy. We sat around nights – in hindsight this no longer seems romantic – in small groups to jointly translate these texts so that we could work with and on them in seminars.

And so we got to know about surface and deep structure, drew syntactic trees, were able to frighten our colleagues with terms like “generative transformational grammar”, immersed ourselves in the problems of language acquisition and universal grammar – and we gradually became conscious of the fact that we were working with something groundbreaking, something one could and can safely call revolutionary. I will not now bombard you with the squabbles within the linguistic community over Chomsky’s theory, not with the “Chomsky Hierarchy”, not with computational linguistics – because this panegyric should be about something else, something more.

One more remark though: at the beginning of this year a travelogue about the Piraha people in the Amazon appeared in the magazine “Geo”. Daniel Everett, a professor for linguistics at Illinois State University, had been accompanied by “Geo” reporters on his latest trip to the Amazon. This is nothing unusual. Four years before “Spiegel” had reported on Everett’s life work. Again and again German media had been keen to take up the subject, mostly because a US magazine had issued a similar story. Professor Everett belongs to the indefatigable among those who disagree with Chomsky’s linguistic theory. He wants to prove that Chomsky was wrong in his theory that, even though people speak different languages, in the end they all share an inborn, innate grammar that is basically the same. No, says Everett, language is a product of our lifestyle; it is not biology, but culture. You can see how old this argument is – it was

already raging in Humboldt’s time.

The Piraha in the Amazon are unable to construct complex sentences: their language has no subordinate clauses. This means there is no recursion, no repetition of structures feeding back on themselves. “That is the house that the man who won the lottery built.” It is through subordinate clauses that languages bring recursive thoughts into grammar. According to Chomsky, recursion is a characteristic feature of human language. Everett wants to show that the Piraha cannot refer in speech to that which has been said. That’s what he claims, anyway. And, if his claim can be substantiated, Chomsky would thereby be finished.

The argument doesn’t have to be and cannot be decided here. What is interesting is how stubbornly and insistently it is carried out. Another point can be made, however. In a letter to the editor at “Geo”, a professor from Berlin wrote: “When the sentence ‘Toís Rede, the nut is under the banana tree’ is understood by the other members of the speech community as referring to Toís Rede,” (and I as the speaker don’t say ‘There is Toís Rede, and there is a nut under the banana tree’), “then, with my sentence, I am making reference to another sentence and have therewith embedded another sentence in my sentence. This is an example of recursion.” This he follows with the words: “Chomsky cannot so easily be defeated.” As a researcher, could one wish for anything better as a field of research?

Argumentation brings research to life. To quote Heracles: ‘polemos pater panton’ – conflict is the father of all things, the conflict over and for that which is important to us. Those for whom nothing is important have nothing to fight for. And this is especially true for Noam Chomsky as a political person. I have met many researchers who are masters of the high art of dividing themselves up as human beings: now I’m a researcher, now a person – preferably a private person -, but I am only a political person when I have basically no other choice. There are many who are this type of person. I am fascinated all the more by those who see themselves as a whole, as a single unit, and who cannot fathom why one should struggle against being a whole person. Being a whole person, for them,



is something that is naturally self-evident.

In 1969 Chomsky's first book by Chomsky appeared in German: *Aspects of the Theory of Syntax*. One year later *Language and Mind* appeared, containing an appendix entitled "Linguistics and Politics". Linguistics and politics? Yes, of course. The appendix was a reprinted interview with the "New Left Review" and dealt with the war in Vietnam, Marxism and anarchism, the problems in Palestine, the Civil Rights movement, and the student protest movement. The impressive thing about this was realizing that this was no "parlor" intellectual who had a prepared answer for everything. Rather, this was a man who knew what he was talking about.

To take one example: Lenin, who in *State and Revolution* and *April Theses* had developed a theory which clearly didn't jive with his own practices, which was his refusal to accept advice and the crushing of working-class opposition. Those who were familiar with Rosa Luxemburg's criticism of Lenin knew what the free association of the masses meant for a revolutionary movement. He had read that?

And there were sentences like: "True resistance to the war leads directly to real resistance to imperialism and the causes of imperialism and thereby to the creation of a fundamental anti-capitalist movement." This was exactly how we were speaking at plenary meetings and demonstrations.

Here was someone who could definitely say what US imperialism during and after the Second World War meant: the financing of France's war in Indochina, before the USA decided to take the matter in hand itself; the support of military dictatorships in Greece, Korea, Guatemala, and El Salvador; the aiding of terror regimes in Angola and Mozambique, among others.

Tied up with all this is one crucial question: how can it be that the public knows so little about these things? Does it even want to know? So much information is freely available, at least in a largely free society. Chomsky dubs this the "Orwell problem". Orwell was impressed by the ability of totalitarian systems to lie to their people and distort reality that contradicted clear facts. Chomsky says that even in democratic societies, the Establishment wants to bring public

opinion under control, and to a certain extent it succeeds. This is because there are enough journalists, publicists, academics, and PR experts who can tell the people exactly what is in the interests of the economically powerful.

Of course, as a journalist I am often confronted with such things and naturally have to refute such claims with apparent conviction. First, I would say, there are always those who do their job badly; second, we are in Germany and not in the USA; and third, the overwhelming majority of journalists at least try to report the truth to their readers, listeners, and viewers to the best of their ability and conscience. It is all honestly meant, and to this I hold fast.

Yet time and again I have to think about "Orwell's problem". At readings or podium discussions I am often asked how it can be that almost no journalist warned the public that the financial crisis was looming. In answer to this I have to say: how? Almost all of the influential journalists specializing in finance and the economy have studied neoclassical economics; to some extent they themselves adhere to these theories. There is a lot of Milton Friedman out there, a lot of Friedrich Hayek – above all the conviction that freedom of the market means that the market should not be interfered with, because, if it is, everything will collapse. That everything collapsed *because* the market was allowed to run riot, because the radical players in the market were literally released from all governmental restraint – this truth is now becoming apparent, and this even in the financial and economic press.

But this is not just about the press and the media and its responsibility, it goes beyond that to the collective responsibility of intellectuals. In 1969 – the same year as *Aspects of the Theory of Syntax* appeared – a collection of essays was published with the German title *Amerika und die neuen Mandariner* (*America and the New Mandarins*), which contained an article from the *New York Review of Books* from February 1967 entitled "The Responsibility of Intellectuals".

In this essay one finds the words: "Western democracies hold in readiness leisure, accommodation, and education for a privileged minority and allows them to seek the truth concealed behind the veil of falsification and distortion,



ideology, and class interests, behind which current events are presented to us.” There’s more: “Intellectuals have a responsibility to tell the truth and expose falsehoods.” This is clear and self-evident. Not in the USA, says Chomsky. It was not with the initial involvement in the war in Vietnam, but as it progressed that America lost its conscience. Above all the intellectuals around President Kennedy were neither prepared nor able to tell the truth, because they were too deeply trapped in the lie themselves. They became the new mandarins, turning into courtiers who allowed themselves to be corrupted in and by the pursuit of power.

The book’s reception in an environment driven by student protests and student movements was of course positive – that an American intellectual was so clearly on the side of those opposed to the war was not something one saw every day. While the linguist Noam Chomsky remained visible to Germany’s academics, the political person Noam Chomsky rather quickly slipped beneath the radar of much of society. Intellectual fashion changes and shifts relatively quickly. At the end of the ‘60s and the beginning of the ‘70s, Chomsky was a Suhrkamp author, but after that nothing much else came along. In 1977 and 1981 came academic work, but nothing political. This also shows that even Suhrkamp – despite its many positive attributes – was and is a publishing house that changes as intellectual fashions change.

This is not to say that Noam Chomsky was forgotten in this country, as you would be inclined to think if all you considered were books. In Germany, he tended to be kept in print by publishers on the Left and to be heeded by leftist media and websites, just as he was in the USA. And the critical public in Germany – whether they called themselves left, liberal, left-liberal, or enlightened conservative was never important – had always seen Chomsky as an ally. This is because it is always nice to be able to cite an *American* intellectual when any criticism of the US government is branded as anti-American, just as any criticism of the Israeli government is denounced as anti-Semitic.

The anti-Americanism thing is not so easy, as we all know. Noam Chomsky time and again finds himself exposed to this allegation. In this

country, too, many would label it as stubbornness rather than pertinacity that Chomsky has, for more than 40 years, been a political combatant on the side of freedom and equality. “Chief Prosecutor against the USA” is how he is touted in the taz. “Whenever an injustice is committed in this world, Noam Chomsky is on the spot to comment,” the taz notes further. On the occasion of the awarding of the 2004 Carl-von-Ossietzky Prize in Oldenburg, the taz said, “The Left is simply where one is placidly in the right – mostly alone, with fellows leftists one’s sole companions. The Chomsky debate will be held in the remote Uni-Audimax.” The readers could not know that the room was so full that the debate was broadcast to several hundred interested viewers standing outside in the vestibule.

“Spiegel” had already struck patronizing and sneering base notes back in 1970: “Chomsky is a prophet – angry, wrathful, on occasion outraged, suffering because of the evil of this world,” they said. “The grandfather of America’s criticizers” and “the Michael Moore for intellectuals” was what “Spiegel” called him 35 years later on the occasion of a Chomsky appearance in Berlin. While this man – an “intellectual pop star” – is perhaps able to attract masses of people – above all young people – and to always pack houses, all of this comes to nothing. The “Sueddeutsche Zeitung” has described him at best as “being and remaining the voice of political youth for the past four decades.” And that is not exactly meant to be kind.

What bothers many in the USA and in Germany is the consistency with which Chomsky pursues his mission as an intellectual to seek truth and uncover lies. This annoys many, not the least because the search for truth meanders and is fraught with errors. They are annoyed because criticism should, at some point, fade when it is no longer up to date.

For some time now, there has been in this country a semi-intellectual fashion that sees criticism as a job of intellectuals to be fully anti-quoted. “Conformists of otherness” is what the media specialist Norbert Bolz calls the “altermen and admonishers” – those who stubbornly insist on their old credos – who see the normal way of things as threatening. He has also shortly and



sweetly announced the “end of criticism”. This above all is true of journalism. “The critical journalism that exposes wrongs is over,” he says. “Its representatives are solely occupied with glorifying the past.” But he also sees some good developments: “The stories in ‘Spiegel’ today are cleaner and less critical – and therefore more up to date.” He is completely serious when he says this. His book appeared in 1999.

Two years later – after the terror attacks of September 11th – one could read in the journal “Merkur” (the “German Journal for European Thought”) what “the end of criticism” really means. The argumentation in time-lapse: The critical intellectual is a useful idiot – in the service of terror and they get along well together. “Political provincialism” is taking hold in this country, its discussion concerning the happening of an event is nothing more than “pseudo-theoretical distraction”. In a situation such as this thinking is not what is called for – instead one should “react decisively”.

This is recognizable in the language of 1914, when the cry of many intellectuals for war was punctuated with catchwords like the law of trade, the cowardice of debate, the hour of action. At that time this was called intellectual “Wilhelmism”. What should one term the same rhetoric today?

Perhaps “Americanism” is the flipside of “anti-Americanism”, because this is exactly what these arguments are all about. Chomsky is always accused of being anti-American. This accusation was and is leveled at all in this country critical of traditional, old-fashioned ways. The laudatory loves to talk about himself when he praises those to be honored – hopefully some of that brilliance will fall on himself. I, too, want this. This is exactly my experience with – forgive the old-fashioned expression – upright intellectuals like Noam Chomsky: this *is* about me. And now I – along with old Horace – pathetically say: “*Nam tua res agitur, paries cum proximus ardet*”: “It is your business when your neighbor’s wall is burning.”

I have always had many difficulties with the term “anti-Americanism”. I don’t really know what it is supposed to mean. But behind this term, thinking is apparently taboo. Now one can argue: don’t play the fool. An anti-American

tradition flourished from the German Romantics through to the German nationalists through to the Nazis parallel to the leftist supporters of Hegel through to the labor movements through to the student movements and today to the so-called opponents of globalization.

This may be, but it is sometimes very useful to play the fool. Of course there is a tradition that criticizes America as being “devoid of culture” and “devoid of history”. I find myself hesitating at these words, because criticism, differentiation, and analysis cannot be the issue here. The stupidity of this can be easily exposed. This type of offense is on the level of the derogatory term “krauts”, which the English invented for the Germans. Am I “anti-French” if I bring up the tendency for the French to eat frogs more as sneer than in a tolerant way? Thoughts like these would not occur to anyone. What makes me think these things is that the term “anti-Americanism” must have been invented by passionate believers in “Americanism”.

As a matter of fact, many have happily accepted the “anti-American” bluster. At APO (Ausserparlamentarische Opposition) demonstrations there were time and time again banners with “USA – SA – SS” printed on them. We found them then so absurd and ludicrous that we didn’t even speak about them. But they were always present in APO photos. Yes, indeed, there were some – perhaps even many – who thought of themselves as “anti-American” because they were opposed to the war in Vietnam. At times this lack of appropriate terminology was annoying. It even got on the nerves of old DKP (German Communist Party) members like Franz-Josef Degenhardt. He once reminded people in a little song that the USA is also the country of Angela Davis and Martin Luther King, Jr. and Pete Seeger, among others. “In all your anger and wrath, don’t forget that,” he sang.

It had to vex the anti-American controverters that it was precisely the APO generation that was Americanized to such an extent that is hard to fathom today. In literature there was Ernest Hemingway, J.D. Salinger, Upton Sinclair, and Sinclair Lewis. In music there was rhythm and blues, rock n’ roll, and the entirety of pop music. And that wasn’t all. Clothing, attitudes, and politics – the APO generation was the first to be



“socialized” in this way. Anti-American? I’d say exactly the opposite. It was a very specific kind of “Americanism”: a tendency towards a country and a people one didn’t know, but one that had, after all, defeated Hitler and brought freedom. And this is the way one grew up. Then the picture was clouded by reports about McCarthy, racism, Korea, and Vietnam. But this was not anti-Americanism. What a load of nonsense.

This is because America was always on our side. Woody Guthrie sang, “This land is your land, this land is my land.” Langston Hughes, in his poetry, said, “I, too, am America.” Harry Belafonte said, “Ronald Reagan is anti-American, not I.” Even the forms of protest – indeed, especially the forms of protest – with the demonstrations and sit-ins came from over there – everything American. And this worldwide. Both the America-friendly and the America-critical stances are based on the simple thought that the interests of a people or the majority of a people or a downtrodden minority of people are not always represented by their respective government. This simple idea should have been done away with in the times of the Cold War and the times of anti-communist fever in the USA. It was McCarthy and his cronies who decided that “American” could only be that which was official government policy at the time. “Un-American activities” was defined as everything they did not wish to tolerate. The origin and career of words like “anti-American” and “anti-Americanism” can be seen here.

One can follow this line directly to September 11, 2001. Because the confrontation is, to wit: we have acts of terror that were committed, we have thousands of victims, and we have to ask what actions are called for in order to find those who were responsible for these acts and to neutralize them. ‘Neutralize’ means that these perpetrators will not be able to cause any more damage. Can I achieve this by attacking a country militarily? What if innocent people are then killed? How many Afghani children must die in order to dry the tears of those children who lost their parents in the acts of terror that were carried out in New York and Washington? It could very well be that there is no other way other than for the USA to involve itself militarily. I was and remain convinced, however, that

this was not the right way to go about it. But in this connection this isn’t so important. What is important is that we are seeing once again how discussion of such things should not be clubbed to death with terms like “anti-Americanism”. This not only goes for politicians. Conceded: politicians engage in intellectual scolding. That passes. What is bad is that intellectuals themselves are taking the same line and are either allowing themselves to be castrated or are castrating themselves in the sense that they have discarded their most useful tools, those of differentiation, analysis, and debate.

In all of these things I have always found myself and my views backed up by Noam Chomsky. One does not always need to share his opinion. To see the attacks of September 11th as a quasi-logical reaction of the Third World against the imperialist policies of the USA was, to my mind, too simplistic. This is not the only argument. Comparing the policies of Kennedy and other US presidents with Hitler and the Nazis is for me a bit much. “Noam Chomsky is the great master of Hitler comparisons.” That appeared in “Spiegel”. We Germans are, for good reasons, somewhat more sparing with comparisons such as this.

Arguing for the right of Holocaust deniers to be granted freedom of speech – at first I winced and thought: what is he doing? The issue here was the Faurisson affair, in which a French literary critic denied that the Nazi holocaust against the Jews had occurred. And I was then and am still today very impressed with how Chomsky explained his position: Faurisson may be talking terrible nonsense, but one cannot deny him the right to do so openly. Chomsky also referenced an earlier position of his, saying that during the Vietnam war he openly said that war criminals should have the right to back up their own position. He demonstrated this same attitude opposite scientists who had allegedly “proven” that blacks were inferior to whites. I thought how unable I would be to be so consistent. Yet I have the greatest respect for those who are that upright.

A few years ago, I read in a book review that Chomsky is “an old moralist and do-gooder”. It was not a statement that was kindly meant. The do-gooder does not enjoy the best



reputation. I must confess, though: the do-gooders have always seemed to me to be nicer and kinder than those who make this world a

worse place in which to live. There are too many of those anyway.

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Translated by Amanda Kahrsch, Department of English Linguistics (IFLA), University of Stuttgart