

Noam Chomsky Writes to Mrs. Davis About Grammar and Education

March 4, 1984

Dear Mrs. Davis:

Thanks very much for sending me your paper and discussion comments, which I read with much interest. I hesitate to express a judgment on the main question you are addressing, simply from a lack of relevant knowledge. My uninformed guess would be that the study of grammar would have little detectable effect on writing ability, but I think it should be taught for its own intrinsic interest and importance. I don't see how any person can truly be called "educated" who doesn't know the elements of sentence structure, or who doesn't understand the nature of a relative clause, a passive construction, and so on. Furthermore, if one is going to discuss literature, including here what students write themselves, and to come to understand how it is written and why, these conceptual tools are indispensable.

For these purposes, I think traditional grammar so-called (say, the grammar of Jespersen) remains today a very impressive and useful basis for such teaching. I can't see any reason for teaching structural grammars of English, or for teaching transformational grammar in the manner of some instructional books that I have seen (I really don't know the literature well at all), which simply amount to memorizing meaningless formulas.

If contemporary linguistics is to be taught (I think it should be), it is in a different context. I do think it offers an incomparable avenue to understanding the nature of the human mind. It also can provide students with a way to understand how science works. There are questions that are, or should be, fascinating and puzzling: for example, why does the sentence "who did the boys expect to see them" allow the interpretation with them referring to the boys, while the sentence "the boys expect to see them" does not. Or why do the sentences "John is too stubborn to talk to Bill" and "John is too stubborn to talk to" have different "understood subjects" for "talk to" ("John" in the first case; someone other than John in the

second). And myriad others. These are simple, but very puzzling facts. Every child has command of a huge mass of data of this sort. It is also possible to develop explanatory theories of a rather non-trivial sort that explain some of these facts, and to do so without resort to higher mathematics or other conceptual tools not available to the student (or teacher, generally). In this way, one might be introduced into the marvellous world of inquiry in which one learns to wonder about the nature of what seem, superficially, to be obvious phenomena, and to ask why they are the way they are, and to come up with answers. This is an experience generally lacking in the study of the sciences unless the instruction is really done superlatively well. These are all reasons for studying contemporary grammar—as a branch of science, which deals with questions of central human concern and which happens to be fairly accessible, as compared, say, with quantum physics. I doubt that it will improve writing style, but it could help students learn how (and why) to think about hard and intriguing questions, and to develop the natural curiosity that is so often dulled by what we (perhaps misleadingly) call "education."

Anyway, for what it is worth, my own view is that you should go on teaching traditional grammar, even if educational research shows no effect on ability to write. That should not be the main goal of such teaching, in my view.

Sincerely,

Noam Chomsky

Letter from Noam Chomsky to the Editor

March 21, 1984

Dear Professor Berger,

In response to your letter of March 15, I suppose I would have no objection to your publishing my letter to Mrs. Davis, though I would appreciate it if you would make it clear that it was merely an informal letter, not written with an eye to publication. As indicated in the letter, I would not want people to be misled into thinking that I have any special insight into the question of grammar-teaching and writing or any special competence to talk about the matter. Quite frankly, I doubt that others are in a better position, apart from teachers themselves, who really have experience in the matter.

Sincerely yours,

Noam Chomsky