

JRF SPECIAL PDF

Noam Chomsky

1 Chomsky's Biography

1.1 Who He Was

Noam Chomsky (born **1928**) is an **American** linguist, philosopher, and political theorist. He is widely called the **father of modern linguistics**. In the **1950s** he completely changed the way scholars study language: he turned the focus away from simply describing what people say and toward explaining the **mind's natural ability** to produce and understand language. His theory of **generative grammar** made him one of the most cited and respected figures in the field.

CONCEPT

Why is he important? Before Chomsky, the leading view was **behaviourism** — the idea that we learn language only by imitation and reward. Chomsky argued the opposite: that humans are **born** with a built-in knowledge of how language works. This shifted linguistics

from behaviourism to a **cognitive** science, treating language as a window into the human mind.

1.2 Quick Facts

Detail	Information
Born	1928 , United States
Nationality	American
Fields	Linguistics , philosophy, political theory
Famous for	Generative grammar ; Universal Grammar
Landmark book	<i>Syntactic Structures</i> (1957)
Also known as	A political dissident and activist

1.3 The Two Sides of His Work

Chomsky is famous in **two separate worlds**. In **linguistics**, he built the theory of **generative grammar** and argued that the ability to learn language is **innate** (inborn). In **politics**, he became one of the world's best-known **dissidents** — a fierce critic of **imperialism**, **media control**, and **state power**. His most famous political book, *Manufacturing Consent* (co-written with **Edward S. Herman**), argues that the mass media in democracies quietly serve the powerful and shape what the public is allowed to think.

CONCEPT

What is the "nature–nurture" debate in language? It asks whether we learn language mainly from our surroundings (**nurture**) or are born ready for it (**nature**). Chomsky stands firmly on the **nature** side: he

holds that there is an **innate core** of abstract knowledge about language that every human is born with.

2 Important Works

Work	Approx. Date	Genre	Significance
<i>Syntactic Structures</i>	1957	Linguistics	Introduced generative / transformational grammar ; foundation of modern linguistics
Review of <i>Verbal Behavior</i>	1959	Critical review	Demolished Skinner's behaviourist account of language
<i>Aspects of the Theory of Syntax</i>	1965	Linguistics	Introduced deep structure and surface structure
<i>Problems of Knowledge and Freedom</i>	1971	Philosophy	Knowledge, human freedom, and social structures
<i>Reflections on Language</i>	1975	Linguistics	Deep structure, grammar, and universal rules of language
<i>Manufacturing Consent</i>	1988	Political theory	Media criticism (with Edward S. Herman)
<i>Knowledge of Language</i>	1986	Linguistics	Nature of linguistic knowledge and the mind

CONCEPT

Order they were written: *Syntactic Structures* (1957) → *Aspects of the Theory of Syntax* (1965)

→ *Problems of Knowledge and Freedom* (1971) → *Reflections on Language* (1975) → *Knowledge of Language* (1986). Of his linguistics books, *Syntactic Structures* came first and *Knowledge of Language* last.

3 Important Works in Detail

3.1 Syntactic Structures (1957)

In one line: the short book that launched modern linguistics by treating grammar as a system of rules in the mind.

This is Chomsky's **earliest major work** and the **foundation of modern linguistics**. In it he introduced **generative grammar** — and, with it, **transformational grammar** (the two are often joined as **transformational-generative grammar**). The central claim is simple but powerful: a grammar is a finite **set of rules** that can **generate** every grammatically correct sentence of a language, including sentences no one has ever heard before.

To show that **grammar is separate from meaning**, Chomsky offered his famous example sentence: "**Colorless green ideas sleep furiously.**" The sentence is **perfectly grammatical** in its structure, yet it makes **no sense** at all. This proved his point that a speaker's sense of correct **syntax** works independently of whether a sentence is meaningful.

The book also broke sharply with **behaviourism**. Instead of seeing language as a habit learned by imitation, Chomsky treated it as the product of an inner rule-system, laying the ground for his later idea that this system is **innate**.

CONCEPT

What is generative grammar? A set of explicit rules that can **generate** (produce) all and only the grammatically correct sentences of a language from a finite starting point. It explains how speakers create an **infinite** number of new sentences they have never heard before — for example, "The purple cat danced on the roof while singing a song."

CONCEPT

What is transformational grammar? The part of the theory that explains how one sentence structure can be **transformed** into another while keeping the same meaning. For example, "The cat chased the mouse" and "The mouse was chased by the cat" mean the same thing but have different structures; transformation rules link them.

EXAM ESSENTIAL

- *Syntactic Structures* (1957) is a book by **Noam Chomsky**; it introduced **generative / transformational grammar**.
- Chomsky is **most famous for generative grammar** — the set of rules that can generate all grammatically correct sentences in a language.
- The famous test sentence is "**Colorless green ideas sleep furiously**" — grammatically correct but meaningless, showing **syntax is separate from sense**.

- The theory is also called **transformational-generative grammar**.

3.2 Chomsky's Review of Skinner's *Verbal Behavior* (1959)

In one line: a single book review so devastating it helped end the dominance of behaviourism in the study of language.

In **1959** Chomsky published a **review** of *Verbal Behavior*, a book by the behaviourist psychologist **B. F. Skinner**. Skinner had argued that language is just **learned behaviour** — picked up through **imitation, repetition, and reward**, exactly like any other habit. (His related title, *Verbal Learning and Verbal Behavior*, belongs to that behaviourist school, **not** to Chomsky.)

Chomsky's review **demolished** this view. He argued that children do **not** simply copy the words they hear: they routinely produce brand-new sentences they have never been taught, and they master complex rules far too quickly for imitation-and-reward to explain. The review is widely seen as a turning point that pushed psychology and linguistics away from **behaviourism** and toward a **cognitive** understanding of the mind.

CONCEPT

What is "the poverty of the stimulus"?

Chomsky's key argument against behaviourism. The language a child actually hears (the "stimulus") is **limited, messy, and full of errors** — too poor to account for the rich, rule-governed language the child ends up mastering. Since the input is too thin to explain the result, much of our

grammatical knowledge must already be **built in** from birth.

EXAM ESSENTIAL

- **B. F. Skinner** wrote *Verbal Behavior*, arguing language is learned by **imitation and reward**.
- Chomsky **strongly disagreed** and argued that children do not merely copy words but naturally grasp **grammar rules**.
- *Verbal Learning and Verbal Behavior* is **not** a book by Chomsky.

3.3 Aspects of the Theory of Syntax (1965)

In one line: the book that deepened generative grammar and split every sentence into a deep meaning and a surface form.

Published in **1965**, this work **expanded** the ideas of *Syntactic Structures* and presented his fuller theory of **transformational-generative grammar**. Its most important contribution is the distinction between **deep structure** and **surface structure**.

The **deep structure** is the underlying, basic **meaning** of a sentence as it exists in the mind. The **surface structure** is the way the sentence is actually **written or spoken**. Two sentences can share one deep structure (the same meaning) but have very different surface structures. For example, "John gave Mary a book" and "A book was given to Mary by John" carry the **same deep structure** but different **surface structures**. This book also presses the claim that

language acquisition is **innate** and governed by a **Universal Grammar**.

CONCEPT

What are deep structure and surface structure? **Deep structure** is the basic meaning of a sentence; **surface structure** is its actual spoken or written form. Transformation rules connect the two — they convert a single deep structure into the various surface forms a speaker can produce.

EXAM ESSENTIAL

- *Aspects of the Theory of Syntax* (**1965**) is a book by **Chomsky**; it introduced **deep structure** and **surface structure**.
- **Deep structure** = the basic meaning; **surface structure** = the actual spoken/written sentence.
- The book develops **transformational-generative grammar** and argues language acquisition is **innate**.

3.4 Reflections on Language (1975)

In one line: a later book restating that grammar and language rules are universal and rooted in the mind.

Written in **1975**, this book deals with **deep structure, grammar**, and the **universal rules** of language. It continues Chomsky's lifelong argument that beneath the surface variety of the world's tongues lies a shared, innate structure.

EXAM ESSENTIAL

- *Reflections on Language* (1975) is by **Noam Chomsky**.
- It deals with **deep structure**, grammar, and the **universal rules** of language.

3.5 Manufacturing Consent (1988)

In one line: Chomsky's most famous political book, arguing that mass media manufacture public agreement for the powerful.

This is the major work of Chomsky the **political dissident**, co-written with **Edward S. Herman**. Its argument is that in modern democracies the **mass media** do not freely inform the public; instead they quietly serve **state and corporate power**, filtering the news so that citizens come to "consent" to policies that benefit the powerful. The book reflects Chomsky's broader activism against **imperialism**, **media control**, and **state power**.

EXAM ESSENTIAL

- *Manufacturing Consent* (1988) shows Chomsky as a **political dissident**; co-author = **Edward S. Herman**.
- Its theme is the **mass media** serving state and corporate power.

4 Generative Grammar and Universal Grammar

Chomsky has no single "magnum opus" novel or play; his enduring achievement is a body of theory. This section gathers the core concepts that dominate the exam.

4.1 The Big Idea

Chomsky's central claim is that the ability to learn language is **innate** — we are **born** with it. Every normal child masters a hugely complex language quickly and without formal teaching, which Chomsky says is only possible because the basic framework of grammar is already in the mind. He defines a **grammar** as a set of rules that lets us **create and understand** sentences, and he treats language partly as a **mathematical** system.

CONCEPT Which features did Chomsky draw from mathematics? Two: **transformation** and **generation**.

Transformation refers to rules that modify one structure to create another (like a mathematical transformation);

generation refers to producing all the valid sentences of a language (like generating outcomes from a set of rules).

The term "**generative**" itself was borrowed in the **1960s** from mathematics into linguistics by Chomsky.

4.2 Universal Grammar

Universal Grammar (UG) is Chomsky's theory that **all human languages** share a set of **basic grammatical**

principles that are **innate** to the human mind. It is called "universal" because these principles are assumed to be **fundamental to all natural languages** — beneath their surface differences, every language follows similar deep rules. This is why a child can learn **any** language effortlessly, whatever their surroundings.

In the **nature–nurture** debate, UG is the strongest statement of the **nature** side: it proposes an **innate core of abstract knowledge** about language form that pre-specifies a framework for **all** natural human languages.

CONCEPT **What is the Language Acquisition Device**

(LAD)? A theoretical **mental mechanism** that Chomsky says children are born with. The LAD contains the principles of Universal Grammar and is what allows children to acquire language so quickly and easily from the limited speech they hear around them.

EXAM ESSENTIAL

- **Universal Grammar (UG)** was proposed by **Noam Chomsky** — the view that an **innate core** of abstract knowledge pre-specifies a framework for **all** natural human languages.
- UG = a set of **basic grammatical principles** assumed to be **fundamental to all natural languages**.
- The **Language Acquisition Device (LAD)** is the theoretical mental mechanism that lets children learn language effortlessly.
- UG places Chomsky on the **nature** side of the nature–nurture debate.

4.3 Competence and Performance

Chomsky introduced the linked terms **competence** and **performance**, and he is credited as the **first** to develop the notion of **competence** in language studies.

- **Competence:** a speaker's **underlying knowledge** of the rules of their language — the innate, ideal command of grammar and vocabulary in the mind.
- **Performance:** the **actual use** of language in real situations, affected by memory, mood, slips, and context.

Chomsky argued that **competence** matters more for studying language structure, because **performance** is distorted by external factors. Errors in performance do **not** mean a lack of competence. He framed this around an **idealized speaker-hearer** with perfect competence but imperfect performance.

CONCEPT

The Saussure parallel: Chomsky's **performance** corresponds to **Ferdinand de Saussure's** term **parole** (individual speech acts). Chomsky's **competence** corresponds roughly to Saussure's **langue** (the shared, rule-governed system of language).

EXAM ESSENTIAL

- **Noam Chomsky** proposed the terms **competence** and **performance**; he **first developed** the notion of **competence** in language studies.

- **Competence** = innate knowledge of language; **performance** = the actual use of language in real situations.
- Chomsky's **performance** corresponds to Saussure's **parole** (and **competence** to **langue**).
- Errors in performance do not equal a lack of competence.

5 Context and Associations

5.1 Chomsky Among the Theorists

These pairings of concept and theorist appear repeatedly in the exam. Chomsky's own pair is **Competence / Performance**.

Concept	Theorist
Competence / Performance	Noam Chomsky
Langue / Parole	Ferdinand de Saussure
Signifier / Signified	Ferdinand de Saussure
Metaphor / Metonymy	Roman Jakobson
Content / Expression	Louis Hjelmslev
Iconic / Indexical	C. S. Peirce
Readerly / Writerly	Roland Barthes

5.2 Other Figures Chomsky Is Set Against

Person / Source	What they are known for
Steven Pinker	<i>The Language Instinct</i> (1994) — language as a biological instinct
B. F. Skinner	<i>Verbal Behavior</i> — the behaviourist view Chomsky demolished
Louis Hjelmslev	Glossematics linguistics (not Chomsky's field)
Sapir-Whorf	Linguistic determinism — that language determines thought (not Chomsky's)
Braj Kachru	The " Three Circles " model of World Englishes — a field Chomsky did not work in
Edward S. Herman	Co-author of <i>Manufacturing Consent</i>

CONCEPT

Where Chomsky does NOT belong: Chomsky is a theoretical linguist focused on **syntax** and **Universal Grammar**. He is **not** associated with **glossematics** (Hjelmslev), **linguistic determinism** (the Sapir-Whorf hypothesis), or with models of **World Englishes** (such as those of Tom McArthur, Braj Kachru, and Manfred Görlach). The **Grammar Translation Method** of language teaching is also unrelated to him.

5.3 A Few Linguistic Terms Tied to These Questions

CONCEPT

Quick definitions: **Generative** — a term borrowed in the 1960s from mathematics into linguistics by Chomsky. **Collocation** — a habitual association between particular words (e.g. "fast food", "heavy rain"). **Inflection** — when a word changes form to show its grammatical role (run → runs, ran; child → children). **Polarity** — the contrast between positive and negative in sentences (e.g. "She can" vs "She cannot").