

Footnotes

(*1) TESOL: Same disclaimer [I've made previously on this blog](#)--there are so many competing acronyms to describe the job of teaching English: TESOL, ELT, ESL, TEFL, TESL, etc. I'm just going to pick one for the sake of this review.

(*2) On The Folly of Wanting to Know More About Chomsky's Linguistic Theories Because of My Admiration for His Political Work: It's a stupid reason, but I suspect I'm in good company on this. I think a lot of people are curious about Chomsky's linguistic theories because of their interest in his political writings. In fact it's often been speculated (particularly by Chomsky's critics) that admiration for his political work has been one of the reasons he has maintained somewhat of a cult status in linguistics--[Tom Wolfe was of this opinion in *The Kingdom of Speech*](#).

(*3) On Thinking that this Book Would Improve my Knowledge of English Grammar Rules: Although, spoiler alert, it didn't help me with my grammar knowledge at all. At least nothing I can ever use in the ESL classroom. The level of abstraction that this book deals with is not at all useful for the kinds of questions my students have about English grammar.

(*4) On All the Linguistics and TESOL Books I've Read over the Last 10 Years: [Looking over the list of all the linguistic books I've read in the past 10 years](#), it's a decent sized list, but I still can't help feeling it's not as big a list as it should be. Especially since, as I've mentioned, I've been trying to become an expert in this field since doing my Masters. Why haven't I read more? The reasons for this are 2-fold. One reason is that I'm not very good at disciplining myself and reading more ([as I lament every year](#)). The second reason is that since the books I read for professional development are not inherently interesting for me to read, I'm relying purely on a sense of duty or external motivation to get through these books, and this motivation comes and goes. I'll have periods when I'll feel motivated to read linguistic books, and periods when I just read for pleasure. No doubt, if I had been a more disciplined person over the past 10 years, I'd be a lot more knowledgeable about my field now, and perhaps this would have lead to more professional advancement. Or... perhaps not. Who knows? For one thing it's always questionable how much these books help you in the industry. For another thing, I don't retain all of what I read anyway. A lot of the books I've read on linguistics or language learning over the past 10 years I now remember very little of.

(*5) On Freddie deBoer's Blogpost Encouraging People to Try to Read Above Their Current Level: I can't give you the link because Freddie deBoer has since deleted his old blog.

By the way, there's a contrary opinion by [Steve Donoghue](#) (in one of his many booktube videos) in which he says that you should choose books to read that are at your level, and you don't get any points for trying to read something more advanced than you're ready for. (I can't find the link for that video either. Steve Donoghue cranks out so many videos every week, I can't possibly search through his archive to remember which video he said it on. But it was one of them.) After my experience grinding my way through this Chomsky book, in which I understood very little of the second half of the book and didn't enjoy it at all, I think I've gone over to the side of Steve Donoghue on this question--it's better to try to read at your level.

(*6) On all the Reasons It Took Me So Long to Finish This Book: [In my recent review of *Don Quixote*](#), I apologized for having taken 3 years to finish the book, and gave a long list of excuses as to why it's been difficult to find time to read the past 3 years. All of those excuses apply equally to *Chomsky's Universal Grammar: An Introduction* as well.

(*7) On the idea that at least the authors give you fair warning about the technical nature of the book: Actually if I could complain about this for a second, the truth is that for a new reader, the messages are mixed.

The back cover contains a blurb by Steven Franks of Indiana University:

"Cook and Newsom have written an extremely clear and highly comprehensible introduction to current syntactic theory. This text makes accessible many subtleties of linguistic argumentation, and explains in plain English the reasoning involved..."

Excuse me? *extremely clear*? *highly comprehensible*? *accessible*? *plain English*? Oh, I would beg to differ professor. (To be fair, I suspect "*highly comprehensible*" has a different meaning in graduate schools than it does to the general public, and this book is clearly designed as a text for graduate students.)

But okay, that's just the blurb on the back cover chosen by the publishers. The authors aren't responsible for that. They explicitly warn the reader on pages 41-42 that non-technical readers are going to struggle through chapters 4-9.

Except...on the very first page of the opening chapter, they state:

This book is intended chiefly as an introduction for those who want to have a broad overview of the theory with sufficient detail to see how its main concepts work, rather than for those who are specialist students of syntax,

for whom technical introductions such as Haegeman (1994) and Ouhalla (1994) are more appropriate. (from page 1)

...and yet, on page 42, they warn that non-technical readers should only read chapters 1-3, and only specialists can continue to chapters 4-8. So which is it?

(*8) **The Paragraph I couldn't understand on page 202:** I suppose I should probably give the paragraph so that you know what I'm talking about, huh?

But how does this make wh-items move to the specifier of CP? To explain this, we need to introduce two mechanisms. The first may be called the **Wh-Criterion**, after Rizzi (1991), which states:

all [+Wh] complementizers must contain a [+Wh] element

(This is not in fact Rizzi's own formulation of the Wh-Criterion, but is more similar to a principle proposed by Aoun et al. (1981).) While this is obviously satisfied when there is a [+Wh] complementizer such as *whether* in head position, it does raise the problem of how the Wh-Criterion can be satisfied by wh-movement, which moves a wh-word into the *specifier* of CP, not the head position. This is where the second mechanism comes in, namely **specifier-head agreement**, abbreviated to spec/head agreement. This accounts for a set of phenomena where there is agreement between the head of a phrase X and the element which occupies the specifier of that phrase, specifier of XP. For example, the subject of a finite clause sits in the specifier position of AGRP and it 'agrees' with the head of AGR in that they must have the same nominal features of person, number and gender. If this relationship between specifier and head is universal and so applicable to all phrases, the specifier of CP will also agree with the head C in that both will share the [+Wh] feature. Now, if a wh-item moves into a [+Wh] specifier of CP, this will be enough to satisfy the Wh-Criterion as, although the complementizer position itself may not contain a [+Wh] element, the specifier with which it agrees *does* contain such an element. So the Wh-Criterion is satisfied either by the head complementizer of the CP having [+Wh] or by the [+Wh] of the specifier of CP migrating to the head via spec/head agreement. (p.202--italics and bold in the original)

(*9) **The two paragraphs on page 262 that I complained about not understanding even after reading multiple times and giving me a headache:** I'd better quote these as well, huh? You can make up your own mind.

Returning to the cases of movement from subject position, as this position is not governed by a lexical head, the question is what properly governs traces here? Chomsky (1981a) assumed that the notion of governor is extended in this case to include elements which are co-indexed with the

governee and that this extension of governor is also relevant for proper government. Thus a trace will be properly governed, in this instance, if it is governed by an element that it is co-indexed with, i.e. the moved element or one of the other traces left behind by the moved element. This relationship is often called **antecedent government** and is contrasted with **head government**.

This clearly helps us to account for the *that-trace* phenomenon. In the absence of a *that* complementizer, the trace in the specifier of CP properly governs a trace in subject position. However, when there is a complementizer present, this must interfere with the process of antecedent government, thus making the original trace non-properly governed and in violation of the ECP. Intuitively we can view the situation from the notion that government should be a unique relationship such that if one element governs another, then the governed element should not also be governed by anything else. The appearance of the complementizer blocks antecedent government because it adds a nearer potential governor (the complementizer) but, as this is not a proper governor, the original trace will violate the ECP. (The first 2 paragraphs from page 262. Bold and italics in the original)

(*10) **On not Appreciating How Much Free Time I had Back in July 2020:** The other thing I started back in July 2020 was trying to learn multiple languages on Duolingo. I had been studying [Vietnamese](#), but I decided that I couldn't really hope to truly understand Chomsky's Universal Grammar unless I had a working knowledge of several different languages. So I started reviewing [Japanese](#) on Duolingo, trying to go back to my high school [Latin](#), and adding in [French](#), [Spanish](#) and even German. At the time, I thought this would be my new normal. (That is, I thought I would keep it going for many years, and then in 10 years time I could be a multi-lingual guy.) But once I got busy again, I had to drop trying to do everything on Duolingo.

(*11) **On Temporarily Shelving *The Grammar Book*:** I haven't [abandoned](#) it. It's still listed in my *Currently Reading* column. But I've temporarily shelved it until I can finish some other books, and then I'll come back to it.

(*12) **On Just Trying to Plow through the Book and Finish in in November 2020:** The other disadvantage that I was operating under was that I was constantly sleep deprived during this period. I was teaching a lot of hours spread out over 3 jobs. I was working the morning shift, so I was up early every morning. And I had a fussy toddler who didn't want to go to bed on time at home. So I seldom got a full night's sleep. And this affected how I engaged with the book. I'm not sure it affected how much I was understanding it. (I wasn't understanding it even before I became sleep

deprived.) But it definitely affected how willing I was to try to concentrate on and wrestle with paragraphs I wasn't understanding. I just didn't have the energy for it.

Again, I thought about delaying this book until I had more free time, but... when was I ever going to have more free time? This is my life. I'm middle-aged, I have a child to take care of, and I have to earn money at work. There was nothing for it but to just keep struggling and trying to finish the book off, even if I wasn't understanding much of the last chapters.

(*13) **On Re-reading this Book:** So between reading it, and now trying to re-read it, I've been carrying this book around with me for over a year at this point. And I should mention it's beginning to cause me some embarrassment at work. At first, everyone was very impressed that I was trying to tackle Chomsky's grammar. And I had to constantly tell people, "Well, yes, it is true that I'm reading this book. But I'm actually understanding very little of it." And then I had to go on to explain that I am actually a person of very limited intelligence, and that this book is much too intellectual for me, etc.

["Well if it's any consolation," one of my colleagues told me over lunch, "That kind of book will be of absolutely no help to you in the ESL classroom anyway." And of course he's absolutely right.]

Now that's it's been over a year and I'm *still* carrying this book around with me, I'm starting to get questions about what I'm still doing with this book. I've started trying to hide the book when I take it down to the coffee shop at lunch break.

(*14) **Examples of When I Thought the Wrong Word had been Written by Mistake:** There were actually several of these, but here's one example from page 245:

In the case of ECM structures, where there is no CP to prevent government of the subject from outside the clause, the Verb will indeed be able to assign the Accusative Case to the subject.

In the margins, I wrote: "*prevent?* It should be *allow*, no?"

Now, I realize I took this all completely out of context, and so no one has a chance of judging whether or not I'm write without reading the whole page. But I mention this to illustrate the type of thing I mean. I could have sworn that the above sentence should have read "allow government" instead of "prevent government". But is this a typo? Or am I just too stupid to understand this book?

(*15) **I couldn't find any negative reviews:** That is to say, I couldn't find any negative reviews on stylistic grounds. There were some anti-Chomskyans who objected to its content. [Such as this guy here:](#)

A load of bunk, Chomsky made shit up as he went along. Nobody is hardwired with universal grammar. In fact, all humans have the intrinsic need to communicate, which in turn is shaped by their linguistic environment. Simply put, people want to communicate and they will always find a way to do so regardless. Doubt my point? Go to Thailand and watch a Thai person with the knowledge of only 10 English words get their point across to a Western tourist.

Oh man... Could it be any more obvious that this guy did not even bother reading the book? Well, welcome to Internet commentary!

(*16) **I'm not that smart:** You know, I've been out of school for so long, I think I've forgotten that I was never a super-star student. I was a good student--a solid B+ student. But I was never one of the superstars.

I did very well in history. (I got As in history). And I did well in literature classes--at least I did well in literature back in high school when literature was about books with straightforward simple narratives. (I did less well in college when I had to struggle with analyzing difficult texts.) But science was always my worst subject--my grades in science were usually B/B-.

In the years since I finished school, [when I've been able to pursue my own interests at my own pace](#), I've cultivated an image of myself as an intellectual. But the truth is, I was always a B student.