
Review of Noam Chomsky's *New Horizons in the Study of Language and Mind*

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New Horizons (Cambridge, U.K.: Cambridge University Press, 2000) is a collection of Noam Chomsky's recent papers on foundational and philosophical problems in the study of human linguistic competence. According to Gilbert Harman, as quoted in the book's blurb, "these essays represent the most significant work that has been done in the general area of philosophy of language and philosophy of mind." This is surprising if true, for in these papers Chomsky places himself well outside the mainstream of current philosophy of language. He mounts a sustained attack on some assumptions regarded by many philosophers as almost platitudinous; and among the targets of forcible criticism in these pages are the views of Burge, Davidson, Dummett, Putnam, and Quine.

Notable among Chomsky's philosophical stalking-horses is the idea that we can at least partly explain the semantic dimension of language by invoking a relation of reference between words and things. Semantics, as he remarks at several places in the essays, could be understood as a part of syntax, construing the latter broadly as the theory of "the properties and arrangements of the symbolic objects." (p. 174) We could even say that for Chomsky, reference is intelligibly construed only as speaker's reference, as against semantic reference (see, for example, p. 188); though he is skeptical whether any appeal to a relation between words (or speakers) and the things they speak about is likely to help explain the nature and function of the human language faculty.

Chomsky's animadversions on reference form only one of several recurrent themes in *New Horizons*. He argues that the mind-body problem has lacked a coherent formulation since the Newtonian demise of mechanistic models of physical reality; that skepticism about meaning, à la Quine, should be taken no more seriously in a scientific inquiry into linguistic competence than should skepticism about syntax or phonology; and that, in general, philosophers adopt a double methodological standard when approaching the study of language, that is, they typically assume that "we must abandon scientific rationality when we study humans 'above the neck'—becoming mystics in this unique domain, imposing arbitrary stipulations and a priori demands of a sort that would never be contemplated in the sciences, or in other ways departing from normal canons of inquiry." (p. 76) Many philosophers will find Chomsky's views irritating. But those who profess allegiance to the generativist program in linguistics would do well to consider carefully where and how they disagree with him.

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