Language and Responsibility: Based on Conversations with Mitsou Ronat

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From back cover:
America's foremost linguist and perhaps its most controversial political critic brings together both sides of his life and work in this wide-ranging, informal, and highly acces sible work. Published in the form of dialogues with Mitsou Ronat, *Language and Responsibility* begins with the themes Noam Chomsky first made so famous in "The Responsibility of Intellectuals" and ends with a remarkably informative, easily understandable exploration of key issues in modern linguistics. Along the way, Chomsky presents a self portrait of his political, moral, and linguistic thinking. He deepens his analysis of American intellectuals, vividly depicting the bankruptcy of American social science; and he offers an illuminating assessment of the American peace movement, Watergate, American foreign policy, Russian dissident intellectuals, a host of other current political issues.

Turning aside from the general ideological beliefs of American intellectuals, Chomsky provides an invaluable introduction to the history of generative grammar. He unveils the controversies that have shaped and structured the under standing of language for the last thirty-five years, and portrays the political social consequences that flow from the behaviorist assumptions so influential in the study of contemporary Society.

Language and Responsibility: Based on Conversations with Mitsou Ronat Details

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Spicy T AKA Mr. Tea says

I recently watched Manufacturing Consent--the film about Chomsky--and became interested, once again, in his writings on linguistics, philosophy, and the technical nature of his generative grammar.

Finding this book was very helpful. I was really happy that it was (based on conversations) written in an interview style and the interviewer knew something about the technical nature of Chomsky's work. Ronat asked probing questions and restated answers to make sure there was comprehension.

The conversations were also helpful in breaking down Chomsky's theories and work while allowing him to expound upon the technical aspects which I was curious about.

It does get abstract and having some background in linguistics would have been a definite help, but not necessarily required. The technical aspects and some of the theory still escape me but I also felt that I was able to keep up, in a sense.

Very appreciative of the book and the flow from philosophy and politics into linguistics, which was most of the book. It was good, though somewhat inaccessible.

Brendan says

pick it up every now and then. read maybe 2/3 of it. dense but approachable. if you are interested in linguistics, chomsky's views on humanity, or philosophy you should read this. there is a reason apart from his political analysis that he is widely considered one of the greatest minds in human history.

Guy says

Language and Responsibility is delightful because it is a quick excursion that reaps huge rewards. The book is conversational Chomsky, without the formality of his lectures, but with chapters more or less exploring a single theme and variations as the intelligence of Chomsky and Ronat meander through the puzzles of language — that humans acquire them with ease, even in 'dire' circumstances; social issues around ideology; and media distortions of 'the truth'.

What particularly caught my fancy right now is his examination of 'so-called' empiricism. He argues that to an alarming extent today's scholars, in particular those in the U.S.A., have forsaken 'proper' empirical scholarship for the siren's call of a capitalist ideology that has all but eliminated free debate and argument outside of a very narrow range of 'respected' acceptability.

After starting the book in the middle, I have moved to reading it from front to cover. I'm currently on my second reading of the chapter "Linguistic and the Human Sciences."

See egajd books - read and almost read for additional thoughts and citations.

This is an excellent read!

K says

This is an interesting little book that sums up Chomsky's views on politics, philosophy, and linguistics. The format is quite unique since we're dealing here with an edited transcript of an interview with Chomsky, where Chomsky himself also acts as the editor! For the most part, this works. The tone remains consistently conversational while Chomsky's discussion of philosophical issues that arise from his linguistic inquiry does not lose any of its sophistication. Take the relation between semantics and truth, for example. Chomsky argues that empirical inquiry on meaning does not need to assume such a relation, on the grounds that the truth-condition of a given proposition is quite often context-dependent. He gives an example of the proposition 'the temperature is falling' and asks whether it's true or not. The answer is that the proposition may be true if the person who utters it has in mind recent time-spans, but false if one considers the effect of global warming. Obviously, this example has immense implications for mainstream philosophy of language where the significance of truth to the study of meaning is quite often taken for granted. Another interesting issue is Chomsky's conception of language, a conception that forms the philosophical foundation of his more technical, scientific work. Chomsky takes public languages like Chinese, or English to be vague, geopolitical notions which one cannot properly (or, perhaps, interestingly) theorise about. His notion of language is something quite abstract, namely a component or faculty of the mind which constantly interacts with other cognitive systems. The purpose of the linguist is to correctly identify this abstract structure and explain its properties. Thus, linguistics is a proper part of psychology and the field's sociological, or historical connotations become irrelevant.

The book gets a bit heavy-going towards the end where Chomsky's specific theories are discussed in greater detail. I suspect that much of the content here is quite outdated as well (for example, Chomsky's recent work seems to suggest a breakthrough in semantics where a rigorous, internalist program is now being pursued). However, there's much historical info here explicitly detailing Chomsky's intellectual development, and that can still be of interest. Moreover, Chomsky's radical political views which take about a chapter are quite intriguing and well thought-out.