

Chomsky, Noam (2017). Language architecture and its import for evolution. *Neuroscience and Biobehavioral Reviews* 81:295–300.

Read the abstract. It really functions as the first paragraph of the article. In particular, it defines “I-language” (“internal languages”) and “FL” (“faculty of language”).

Reading note: On p. 296, Chomsky mentions the function of the Principles & Parameters framework in accounting for acquisition, but does not elaborate. The idea there is that by assuming that there are constant principles and only some small-ish number of parameters (different settings a language can manifest), the task of acquiring a language becomes tractable. A child can have a kind of metaphorical checklist of properties to look for in the input to determine if the language is head-initial or head-final, etc. The possible variation between languages is more constrained than it appeared.

Question 1. On p. 297, Chomsky hypothesizes that the simplest system has an operation Merge, which takes two objects and makes a new object from them. He gives the example of applying Merge to *read* and *books*. What object would be formed by applying Merge to *read* and *books*? This object represents a subtree, a part of a syntactic structure. What would you call (label) that subtree in a tree like those drawn in a prior syntax class?

Question 2. Chomsky continues, envisioning a partial tree structure for the words *he will read which books*, and then applying Merge to this one object by itself, by picking a subtree inside of that object (*which books*) and Merging it with the whole object, to yield *which books he will read which books*—where *which books* winds up in kind of in two different places now as a result. We have a name we used in previous syntax classes for this operation, what is it?

Question 3. On p. 298, Chomsky talks about *the boys expect to meet each other*. Think about the meaning of this. There are two verbs, *expect* and *meet*. Semantically, *expect* relates an experiencer and a proposition (the experiencer has some kind of expectation that the proposition is true) and *meet* relates two individuals (or groups perhaps) arguably such that one experiences the presence of the other. So, there is an experiencer of *expect* and an experiencer of *meet*. *The boys* seems to fulfill both roles semantically, but if we suppose that this is not actually possible, then there must be a hidden/silent experiencer for *meet*. So, um, true or false? The subject of *meet* is PRO.

Question 4. Chomsky then compares this to *I wonder who the boys expect to meet each other*. The verb *wonder* relates an experiencer and a question. The question is effectively “Who do the boys expect to meet each other?” What role does *who* play here? (E.g., is it an experiencer for one of the verbs? A theme for one of the verbs? What semantic role is it playing?) What was playing that role in the previous sentence?

Question 5. On p. 298, Chomsky says that Merge “imposes no order on the merged elements. . . We have to impose linear order on words when we speak.” This is a version of the overall theme: the system that builds hierarchical structures for semantic interpretation is very simple. And this is the part that seems to be human-specific. Yet, languages seem more complicated. The hypothesis is that source of the complexity we see is not the language system exactly, but rather the constraints imposed by the systems required for externalization. Speculate (briefly, please) on how human language might be different if it were possible to telepathically transmit hierarchical structures to one another without the need to say things in order (with some parts expressed before other parts).