



# Reflections on language: Chomsky, linguistic discourse and the value of rhetorical self-consciousness

Chris Werry \*

*Department of Rhetoric and Writing Studies, San Diego State University, 230 Nasatir Hall,  
5500 Campanile Drive, San Diego, CA 92182, United States*

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## Abstract

This paper considers why linguistics, unlike many fields in the humanities and social sciences, has not undergone a “rhetorical” or “reflexive” turn – why it has paid little attention to the language of linguistics. It considers Chomsky’s antipathy to rhetoric, exemplified by his statement that “the best rhetoric is the least rhetoric,” as symptomatic of a wider condition in linguistics, namely a reluctance to consider linguistic discourse as an object of self-reflexive scrutiny. The paper proposes that Chomsky’s work is shaped by a continual flight from rhetoric and reflexivity, by the desire to arrive at a language-independent explanation of language. It considers how this denial of rhetoric proceeds in large part through adoption of a distinctively “ocularcentric” rhetoric that privileges transparency and immediacy, and effaces the linguistic and rhetorical dimensions of knowledge production. The paper considers what a more reflexive, rhetorically self-conscious linguistics might look like. It provides three examples of emerging research in linguistics that are rhetorically self-conscious and attend to the figurative, suasive and formative aspects of disciplinary discourse. The paper considers “strong” and “light” forms of rhetorical self-consciousness, and describes the possible implications of each for linguistic inquiry.

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\* Tel.: +1 619 594 4382.

E-mail address: [cwerry@mail.sdsu.edu](mailto:cwerry@mail.sdsu.edu)

## 1. Introduction

*The best rhetoric is the least rhetoric.* (Chomsky, 1991a, p. 65)

*All categories, including the category “language,” are themselves constructions in language.* (Williams, 1977, p. 21)

At the beginning of “Language, Politics, and Composition: A Conversation with Noam Chomsky,” Gary Olson and Lester Faigley ask Chomsky for his views on rhetoric. Chomsky’s reply is an almost conversation-stopping repudiation of all things rhetorical. He states:

I don’t have any theory of rhetoric, but what I have in the back of my mind is that one should not try to persuade . . . to the extent that I can monitor my own rhetorical activities, which is probably not a lot, I try to refrain from efforts to bring people to reach my conclusions . . . . So I think the best rhetoric is the least rhetoric. (Chomsky, 1991a, pp. 65–66)

Olson and Faigley invite Chomsky to consider how his rhetorical skills may have contributed to the success of his work in linguistics. Chomsky replies that the rhetorical dimensions of knowledge production are superficial, and he sees no legitimate role for rhetoric in “rational” forms of inquiry such as generative linguistics. Chomsky argues that there is little point reflecting on the social and rhetorical dimensions of linguistic inquiry, or any other form of scientific knowledge production since the process of “acquiring” scientific knowledge “suggests a highly directive effect of biological nature” (p. 68). He explains:

The reasoning in the Platonic dialogues, which is valid if not decisive, is that the richness and specificity and commonality of the knowledge we attain is far beyond anything that can be accounted for by the experience available, which includes interpersonal interactions. And, besides being acts of God, that leaves only the possibility that it’s inner-determined. (p. 68)

While few linguists would endorse such a starkly Platonic account of disciplinary knowledge, Chomsky’s reluctance to reflect on the language of linguistics is symptomatic of much work in the field. Modern linguistics consists of many disparate, competing, and sometimes deeply conflicting approaches to the study of language. Yet until very recently, what has characterized almost all forms of linguistic inquiry has been the absence of attention to linguistic discourse itself, to reflexive, rhetorical self-consciousness about the language of linguistics. Unlike fields such as economics, social psychology, philosophy, sociology, anthropology and history, that have undergone a “rhetorical turn,” linguistics has shown little inclination to look “at” as well as “through” its disciplinary discourses (to use the phrase coined by Lanham, 1999).<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Some representative texts from the fields mentioned include McCloskey, 1985, 1994; Samuels, 1990 (economics); Billig, 1996; Potter and Wetherell, 1987 (social psychology); Bartlett and Suber, 1987; Lawson, 1985 (philosophy); Bourdieu and Wacquant, 1992; Woolgar, 1988 (sociology); Ruby, 1982; Clifford and Marcus, 1986 (anthropology); White, 1986; LaCapra, 1983 (history).

Hymes' suggestion in (1983) that linguistics should “apply the principles of a critical, reflexive perspective to its own work” has met with negligible enthusiasm within the field (Hymes, 1983, p. 22).<sup>2</sup>

This rather curious absence has been noted by a few linguists. For example, de Beaugrande remarks that it has been “tacitly assumed that theories [in linguistics] do not critically depend on the language in which they happen to be expounded” and that linguistics has seldom been examined “as a mode of discourse seeking to circumscribe language by means of language” (De Beaugrande, 1991b, p. 1). Taylor observes that it is typically assumed that linguistic discourse is “a more or less transparent window on the underlying features belonging to language form,” and that “modern linguistics does not represent itself as creatively constructing the object it studies, but rather as simply ‘calling it the way it is’” (Taylor, 1997a, pp. 3–4). This is the case even in branches of linguistics that are centrally concerned with the social and cultural aspects of communication.

In this paper I consider the rhetoric of Chomsky's linguistics, arguing that Chomsky's work is shaped by a continual flight from rhetoric and reflexivity, and by the desire to arrive at a language-independent explanation of language. The paper considers how the denial of rhetoric (a familiar rhetorical ploy) proceeds in large part through adoption of a distinctively “ocularcentric” rhetoric that privileges transparency and immediacy, and effaces the linguistic and rhetorical dimensions of knowledge production. Lastly, I consider what a more reflexive, rhetorically self-conscious linguistics might look like, and how this might reorient key aspects of linguistic inquiry. I have selected Chomsky's texts for analysis because they provide such a dramatic example of the anti-rhetorical stance described by de Beaugrande and Taylor, as well as the pivotal assumption that is common

<sup>2</sup> I do not mean to suggest that reflexivity and rhetorical self-consciousness have been entirely absent from linguistics. Examples can certainly be found throughout the discipline's history of scholars who scrutinize the terms and categories used in the field, engage in self-examination, and reflect on a wide range of methodological and theoretical concerns. Taylor notes that Saussure himself opens the door to a more reflexive linguistics (perhaps without recognizing the full implications of so doing) when he states that “the object is not given in advance of the viewpoint: far from it. Rather, one might say that it is the viewpoint itself which creates the object.” (Saussure, 1916, p. 8; Cited in Taylor, 2000, p. 493). Furthermore, scholars in fields that overlap and intersect with linguistics have occasionally argued for the introduction of rhetorical self-awareness into the study of language, and have inspired some work within linguistics that is rhetorically self-conscious (contributions in this regard can be found in the work of figures such as Bakhtin, Wittgenstein, Garfinkel, Bourdieu, Tyler and Hanks). However, it is important to note several things. First, there has been very little work within the dominant branches of 20th century linguistics that exhibits the “strong” kind of rhetorical self-consciousness described in the final part of this paper. That is, work that takes as its point of departure the notion that both language users and linguists are “language makers” is rare. It is rare precisely because orthodox or mainstream academic linguistics is characterized by what integrationists call “the language myth” (Harris, 1981; Love, 2004, pp. 528–530), and this myth depends on denying the linguist and language user's status as language makers. As Kilpert (2003) argues, “the belief that there can be a language-independent explanation of language is both the cause and effect of the many mutations of the myth.” (p. 162) Or as Davis puts it, one of the main flaws of traditional accounts of language is the failure to acknowledge that “language is both a means of communication and a topic of inquiry” (p. 8). Second, while scholars outside linguistics have sometimes tried to introduce greater rhetorical self-awareness into the study of language, and have influenced linguists to do the same, such attempts have, until recently, remained largely at the margins of the discipline. In this regard linguistics can be contrasted with fields such as anthropology and sociology in which reflexivity has become a central concern.

in contemporary linguistics, namely that linguistic rhetoric can operate as “transparent window” onto its object of inquiry.<sup>3</sup>

## 2. Chomsky’s anti-rhetorical rhetoric

Chomsky’s work has undergone several significant transformations in the last 50 years. However, the central questions that drive his research remain the same. As Chomsky states in “Linguistics and Adjacent Fields,” the three questions that continue to guide his research are: “what constitutes knowledge of language”; “how is such knowledge acquired”; and “how is such knowledge put to use” (Chomsky, 1991b, p. 6). The system of knowledge underlying language use, in essence a “cognitive state,” is made the center of linguistic analysis. This knowledge is depicted as impervious to social factors, “fixed in advance as a disposition of the mind” and unaffected by self-reflection (Chomsky, 1965, p. 48; Chomsky, 1980, p. 231). The object of linguistic inquiry, defined by Chomsky as the tacit knowledge possessed by an ideal “speaker–hearer,” is divorced from the cultural practices and forms of life involved in learning to communicate, and from the rhetorical activities carried out by language users.

One of the primary ways in which Chomsky effaces the linguist as constructive agent in the production of linguistic knowledge and attempts to arrive at a language-independent explanation of language is by naturalizing linguistic inquiry by equating it with the “natural” object of inquiry. That is to say, Chomskyan linguistics is naturalized through its conflation with the object of analysis. In Chomsky’s writings a relationship of equivalence is set up between the speaker’s innate knowledge as naturalized object of inquiry, and the knowledge of the linguist. For example, in *Language and Mind* Chomsky (1968) suggests that acquisition of “knowledge of a language, for example – is not unlike theory construction of the most abstract sort” (p. 90). Both the ideal speaker and the linguist are depicted as developing and representing a generative model on the basis of fragmentary and incomplete evidence (Chomsky, 1965, p. 24). As Hanks notes, Chomsky establishes “a deep-seated parallelism between the grammar as an analytic construct and the mental reality of the ideal speaker listener” (Hanks, 1996, p. 77). Both knowledges (the ideal speaker–listener’s, and the linguist’s) are naturalized, considered in large part as “internal” and “innate,” and are deeply rooted in the architecture of cognition. For example, in a 1994 interview with Haley, Chomsky argues:

There’s some instinctive mechanism we have that is a kind of theory construction module of the brain . . . that maps – that constructs – theoretical interpretation from scattered data. And we do it instinctively. And then we check it out by induction and methodology of science and all that kind of stuff. (Haley and Lunsford, 1994, p. 182)

<sup>3</sup> Consider, for example, the comments of two prominent linguists who are critical of Chomsky, take very different approaches to the study of language, yet who assume, like Chomsky, that they do not construct the object of analysis, but merely “call it the way it is.” Charles Fillmore, one of the founders of cognitive linguistics, argues that whereas Chomskyan linguistics can be likened to the practice of a “butcher,” in that the categories and segmentations imposed on the body of language are arbitrary and not aligned with underlying reality, cognitive linguistics can be likened to the practice of “anatomy students” discovering “how the animal is put together” (Fillmore, 1984, p. 74). Emanuel Schegloff, a central figure in the creation of conversation analysis, argues that what distinguishes conversation analysis is that it does not impose constructed categories on language but takes “seriously the object of inquiry *in its own terms*” (Schegloff, 1997, p. 167, emphasis in original).

Haley and Lunsford note that Chomsky sees a clear parallel between the acquisition of language and the “acquisition” of linguistic theory. He holds that “just as native speakers are born with certain structures in the brain that allow us to learn language, we are born with structures that constrain and allow us to construct theories about how we learn language” (p. 182). However, Chomsky’s construction of an isomorphic relationship between the object of inquiry and the analyst’s knowledge goes even further than this. The equivalence posited between the object of inquiry and the analyst’s knowledge of it applies not just to linguistics but to scientific knowledge in general. In *Rules and Representations* Chomsky argues that scientific knowledge is characterized by many of the same qualities as knowledge of language (as object of inquiry), including “degenerate evidence,” idealization and abstraction, and “poverty of the stimulus,” implying that a faculty of scientific knowledge production must be innate. Chomsky states that because scientists develop theories so quickly, often arrive simultaneously at particular theories, and are in general agreement as to the truth of theories, we must possess a “science forming capacity” that enables us to recognize “theories as intelligible and natural,” and that a “universal grammar” of scientific theories may exist. He writes:

Some such science forming capacity must be an innate capacity of the mind. That is not to say that all scientific knowledge is ‘preformed’ at birth. Rather, the human mind is endowed with some set of principles that can be put to work when certain questions are posed, a certain level of understanding has been achieved, and certain evidence is available, to select a narrow class of possible theories. Perhaps, these principles, too, might fruitfully be regarded as a general schematism that characterizes the class of intelligible theories, thus permitting us to develop systems of belief and knowledge of great scope and power on limited evidence. . . Analogously, a rich set of principles of universal grammar permits us to attain our extensive knowledge of language on limited evidence. . . It is conceivable that we might discover the principles that underlie the construction of intelligible theories, thus arriving at a kind of ‘universal grammar’ of scientific theories. (Chomsky, 1980, pp. 250–251)

The passage above suggests how strongly Chomskyan linguistics is informed by the logic of reflection and subsumption. Chomsky defines language as both reflection and part of cognition, and the linguistic scientist’s knowledge of language correspondingly both reflects and is a function of the cognitive system. This double move not only naturalizes knowledge, but also sutures together the object, representation and knowledge. It is necessary because the logic of reflection, by itself, is not enough to guarantee the self-coincidence, unity and fixity of the object. In fact, it raises potential problems that could unsettle the foundations of Chomskyan linguistics. For as Derrida asserts, “The reflection, the image, the double, splits what it doubles. The origin of the speculation becomes a difference. What can look at itself is not one; and the law of the addition of the origin to its representation, of the thing to its image, is that one plus one makes at least three” (Derrida, 1978, p. 12). Within Chomskyan linguistics, reflection on knowledge production raises the issue of how we know what we know, or more precisely, “how do we know what we know about an object which is itself a kind of knowledge, and which is assumed to mirror the mind that produces this knowledge?” (Chomsky is fond of the expression that “language is a mirror of the mind.” The linguist’s discourse is thus a reflection of a reflection of a reflection.) Such a state of affairs opens up the danger of infinite regress, the problem of the mind’s grasp of itself grasping itself. Chomsky solves this problem by

naturalizing knowledge, anchoring epistemology in biology, and assimilating language as construct to language as mental reality. By universalizing the knowing subject, naturalizing knowledge, and insulating it from culture, society and language, Chomsky severely restricts consideration of how knowledges are produced.

An important index of the degree to which Chomsky seeks to subsume linguistic discourse into language as “natural object” can be found in his strategy of “systematic ambiguity.” First outlined in *Aspects of the Theory of Syntax*, “systematic ambiguity” is an explicit methodological strategy in which terms denoting linguistic constructs and terms denoting the “mental reality” of grammar are conflated. (Chomsky, 1980, p. 220; Chomsky, 1986, pp. 29–31). The strategy is identifiable in passages such as the following:

Using the term “grammar” with a systematic ambiguity (to refer, first to the native speaker’s internally represented “theory of his language,” and, second, to a linguist’s account of this), we can say that the child has developed and internally represented a generative grammar. (Chomsky, 1965, p. 25)

Chomsky also proposes that the word “theory” can be used in an equally “ambiguous” way. Outlining similarities between the child’s development of an internally represented “theory” of language based on universal properties of mind and exposure to fragmented and incomplete data, and the linguist’s construction of a theory of language based on similar conditions, Chomsky states:

Note that we are again using the term “theory” – in this case “theory of a language” rather than “theory of a particular language” – with a systematic ambiguity, to refer both to the child’s innate predisposition to learn a language of a certain type and to the linguist’s account of this. (Chomsky, 1965, p. 25)

This conflation of terms tends to conceal the constructedness of Chomskyan theory since the language of disciplinary invention is absorbed into the natural object. This process of conflation is achieved through the construction of a set of terminological equivalencies and homologous textual structures in Chomsky’s texts. Terminological equivalences are established in the key terms Chomsky uses to describe the central objects (for example, “knowledge,” “grammar,” “theory”) and processes (“generate,” “represent,” “describe,” “characterize,” “determine”) of his theory. A symmetrical relationship is constructed between the use of these categories to describe grammar as a real structure in the mind, and their use in describing the products of theoretical representation. Thus “representation” is something that the linguist engages in, as well as something the linguist’s theory produces or “generates,” and is also something that takes place internally in the mind of the ideal speaker–hearer. Furthermore, “theory,” as described in the quotation above, is something produced by the linguist, but also something produced in the mind of the language learner. A remarkable degree of similarity and symmetry exists between the terms used to describe theory and object. Consider, for example, how terms like “theory,” “primary linguistic data,” “linguistic theory,” “method” and “grammar” are used to describe the acquisition of knowledge by the ideal speaker–hearer:

The child constructs a grammar – that is, a theory of the language of which the well-formed sentences of the primary linguistic data constitute a small sample. To learn a language, then, the child must have a method for devising an appropriate grammar, given primary linguistic data. As a precondition for language learning, he must

possess, first, a linguistic theory that specifies the form of the grammar of a possible human language, and, second, a strategy for selecting a grammar of the appropriate form that is compatible with the primary linguistic data. As a long range task for general linguistics, we might set the problem of developing an account of this innate linguistic theory that provides the basis for language learning. (Chomsky, 1965, p. 25)

This account of the ideal speaker–hearer’s acquisition of language closely resembles descriptions of the linguist’s practice of constructing a theory of language. The objects and processes described constitute a series of terms (“constructing a grammar,” “having a method,” “theory of language,” “primary linguistic data,” etc.) that are central to both the reality of the internally represented system of knowledge and the linguist’s practice of knowledge construction. Chomskyan linguistics thus tries to produce what Charles Taylor calls “nomological science,” or a theoretical description whereby the phenomenon to be explained is completely absorbed by the law or structure which constitutes its explanation.

Chomsky’s representations of grammar are also fashioned to efface the linguist’s representational agency. Consider, for example, these two passages from *Rules and Representations*. The first is a discussion of grammar as the linguist’s construct, the second is of grammar as “mental reality”:

The grammar of the language determines the properties of each of the sentences of the language. For each sentence, the grammar determines aspects of its phonetic form, its meaning, and perhaps more. The language is the set of sentences that are described by the grammar. (p. 220)

The grammar, in whatever form its principles are represented in the mind and brain, simply characterizes the properties of sentences, much as the principles of arithmetic determine the properties of numbers. (p. 222)

The analyst’s agency is minimized. In both discussions grammar is the key actor. An important effect of such discursive strategies is to assign agency to the object of inquiry and to exclude the activity of the linguistic analyst and her involvement in representational practice. Chomsky consistently talks of both the linguist’s grammar, and the ideal speaker–hearer’s internal grammar, as “characterizing,” “representing,” “describing” and “determining” various aspects of language. As Randy Harris notes in his analysis of rhetorical strategies in *Syntactic Structures*, we are presented with a framework in which “the grammar dictates, and the analysts follow” (Harris, 1989, p. 122). Grammar, whether as linguistic theory, or as “real” mental object, is the main character in Chomsky’s theoretical narrative. The linguist exists largely at the margins of this narrative.

Just as grammar is represented as “dictating” the terms of its analysis, Chomsky presents his theoretical framework as requiring little argument because it is the inevitable outcome of a properly objective, rigorous and scientific approach to the study of language. This position is articulated in various different forms in Chomsky’s writings, but is perhaps most evident in Chomsky’s accounts of how an ideal scientist, “S,” would approach the study of language. For example, Chomsky presents the reader with the following parable, designed to help us imagine what the best way of studying language might be:

Imagine a scientist, henceforth S, who is unencumbered by the ideological baggage that forms part of our intellectual tradition and is thus prepared to study humans as organisms in the natural world. Let us consider a course of inquiry that S might

undertake, sketching conclusions that he might tentatively reach along the way. (Chomsky, 1975, p. 139)

Chomsky proposes that if one adopts such a neutral, scientific approach to the study of language, one will arrive at generative linguistics. We are told that S's inquiry will lead him to "develop a general theory of cognitive structures in which grammar appears as a specific component," and that this theory "requires idealization and abstraction" (p. 139). The emergence of Chomskyan linguistics is represented as the natural unfolding of human reason, thus displacing consideration of how knowledge is produced, the conditions of its production, dissemination and reception. Like the linguistic–cognitive development of the ideal speaker–hearer, the idealized theorist is described as naturally acquiring a theory that is generative. Chomsky also suggests that S would come to reject the kind of theories Chomsky opposes, and might even be able to discover the social factors that lead others to reject theories such as Chomsky's, while holding on to mistaken rival theories. Chomsky writes:

Noting further the persistence of the contrary belief in the face of disconfirming evidence that is quite easy to come by, S might try to discover ideological or social factors that lead his subjects to reject theories that seem to offer some hope of success, while clinging to beliefs that appear to be inconsistent with even the most rudimentary observations. (Chomsky, 1975, p. 142)

Opposition to Chomsky's theory thus becomes unreason, and accepting Chomsky's account is less a matter of being persuaded than of allowing the natural light of reason to guide one to the truth. Once more, rhetoric is denied a role in linguistic inquiry. In an ideal world it would not be needed. Interestingly, Chomsky does consider reflecting on the nature of knowledge production in this instance, but only as a way of diagnosing error – the "ideological or social factors" that lead some people to reject scientific theories of language such as his own.

### 3. Visualism and the flight from rhetoric

Chomsky's naturalization of linguistic inquiry, conflation of object and representation, and construction of linguistic theory in terms of the qualities and categories assigned to language help explain why he is so dismissive of examining how knowledge is produced, communicated and legitimized. Furthermore, his characterization of language as a coherent disciplinary object that is "found" rather than "made," and the representation of linguistic knowledge as objective and scientific, depends on the exclusion of rhetoric from linguistics, an exclusion carried out through the adoption of a distinctively ocularcentric rhetoric.

Foundational discourses that privilege objectivity, certainty and transparency have a long tradition of using visual tropes to represent ideal knowledge. This tradition has been explored by cultural historians of the senses such as [Classen \(1993\)](#) and [Synnott \(1993\)](#), theorists of visual culture such as [Jay \(1993\)](#) and [Levin \(1993\)](#), analysts of orality and literacy such as [Ong and Walter \(1982\)](#) and [Havelock \(1986\)](#), as well as philosophers working from phenomenological, poststructuralist and pragmatist perspectives. Thus [Dewey \(1929\)](#) notes that in Western philosophy since Plato and Aristotle "the theory of knowing is modeled after what was supposed to take place in the act of vision" (p. 23).

Wittgenstein's later work warns of the bewitching effects of visualism ("A picture held us captive. And we could not get outside it, for it lay in our language and language seemed to repeat it to us inexorably." Wittgenstein, 1953, p. 115). Rorty (1979) writes of how the "ocular metaphor seized the imagination of the founders of Western thought," and a focus on knowledge of universal concepts contributed to make "the Eye of the mind the inescapable model for the better sort of knowledge" (pp. 38–39). Derrida asserts that "starting with its first words, metaphysics associates sight with knowledge" (Derrida, 1983, p. 4), and Jay has advanced the provocative claim that "vision is the master sense of the modern era" (Jay, 1988, p. 3).<sup>4</sup>

Nowhere is the representation of knowledge and thought more strongly visualist than in Cartesian philosophy. The metaphor of the mind as inner vision is central to Descartes' representation of thought. Descartes (1985) states, "We shall learn how to employ our mental intuition by comparing it with the way that we employ our eyes,"<sup>5</sup> and "when the mind understands, it in some way turns towards itself and inspects of the ideas which are within. In *Modernity and the Hegemony of Vision*, Levin argues that Descartes is the modern philosopher most obviously indebted to the metaphor of knowledge as vision, the figure whose work most clearly exemplifies a discourse dominated by an ocular metaphoric (Levin, 1993, p. 9). Chomsky has described his own theoretical project as "Cartesian" (one of his books is entitled *Cartesian Linguistics: A Chapter in the History of Rationalist Thought*) and has devoted much of his work to defending and expanding a Rationalist approach to linguistics. It is perhaps not surprising, then, that Chomsky's work is also profoundly ocularcentric. While a range of figurative expressions characterize generative discourse, ocular metaphors are assigned a place of particular importance. Chomsky advances the basic premises of his work through visual analogies, models, and metaphors, and through comparisons between research on vision and research on language. Visual tropes and examples play a central role in Chomsky's accounts of Rationalism, innateness, poverty of the stimulus, and learning. From his use of "introspection" (the method by which generative linguists can test their theories against data they generate themselves, based on individual intuitions of correctness) to his definition of language as a "mirror of the mind," to his claim that language is a "mental organ analogous to the human visual system" (Chomsky, 1980, p. 39), Chomskyan linguistics is permeated by references to vision. A full examination of the ocularcentrism of Chomsky's linguistics is beyond the scope of this paper. Instead, I will concentrate on two key ways in which visual

<sup>4</sup> It should be noted that many of these writers, most obviously Jonas, Classen and Ong, at times attribute intrinsic characteristics to different sense modalities. That is, they suggest that certain theoretical commitments follow inevitably from the choice of different sensory metaphors for knowledge. While I acknowledge that different senses perhaps provide different metaphorical 'affordances,' I do not assume that they have an essence that leads to a corresponding set of epistemological values. Thus while I draw on work that examines the relationship between visualist discourses and particular theoretical frameworks, I assume that vision can and has been culturally constructed in a variety of different ways, and that many different sense metaphors can be used to represent knowledge. For example, Tyler's (1984) work on Dravidian languages and Handelman's (1982) contrastive discussion of Hebrew and Hellenic metaphors for knowledge explore how some cultures use non-visual metaphors for knowledge. Snell's (1953) arguments about early Greek representations of vision also suggest that sight can be constructed in ways that assume a different, less passive relationship between subject and object. And following Nietzsche, a number of poststructuralist writers have described knowledge in terms of a decentered, multi-perspectival, incarnate vision.

<sup>5</sup> Descartes, *Regulae IX*. Cited in Keller and Grontowski (1983, p. 214).

figures are used to construct linguistic discourse as a transparent window and to advance a “least rhetoric” rhetoric. First, I will consider Chomsky’s use of visual tropes in his representation of knowledge and language as “ideals,” and examine how this representation effaces the linguistic and rhetorical dimensions of knowledge production. Second, I will consider a more specific use of visual references and analogies, namely their employment in rebuttals and counterarguments. I propose that these references and analogies function as “an undeniability device,” a persuasive strategy that attempts to align Chomsky’s work with what is self-evidently true, undeniable, and thus “beyond” argument.

### 3.1. *Visual rhetoric and ideal knowledge*

Chomsky (1975) supports the basic premises of Rationalist thinkers such as Plato, Descartes, Leibniz and Cudworth, as well as his own extension of the Rationalist project, in large part through analogies between research on vision and language, and through visual tropes and imagery. Thus Chomsky’s arguments for innateness are based on a series of parallels with visual perception: the “wired-in” character of the visual system; the inbuilt ability of the infant perceptual system to perceive various aspects of three-dimensional space, and the notion that an innate “grammar of vision” akin to the grammar of human language may be built into the nervous system (Chomsky, 1975, p. 8). Chomsky also draws on a series of visual figures to support the argument that the Rationalist account of knowledge provides the most plausible framework for understanding language and cognition. For example, in a discussion of the work of the seventeenth century neo-Platonist Cudworth, Chomsky references the traditional Rationalist distinction between the “Eye of the Mind” and the “Eye of the Body” to argue that knowledge of reality derives from “our special mental design” (p. 6). Endorsing Cudworth’s description of knowledge as inner vision, Chomsky states, “The eye perceives, but the mind can compare, analyze, see cause-and-effect relations, symmetries, and so on, giving a comprehensive idea of the whole, with its parts, relations, and proportions” (p. 6). This concept of knowledge is modeled on the idealized visual perception of a conceptual object in a field of ordered, geometric, Euclidian space. Ideal knowledge consists of a complete view of a conceptual object and its component parts. Quoting Cudworth, Chomsky extends the analogy through the use of another strongly optical metaphor, that of visually deciphering a piece of writing: “The ‘book of nature,’ then, is ‘legible only to an intellectual eye’ [Cudworth] suggests, just as a man who reads a book in a language that he knows can learn something from the ‘inky scrawls’” (p. 7). Chomsky argues that the Rationalist account of mind and knowledge, once updated and “purged of the error of preexistence,” provides the best way to approach the study of language.

If viewing language with an “intellectual eye” should be the goal of linguistic inquiry, what will this enable the analyst to see, and will the language of disciplinary inquiry itself be visible? In many of Chomsky’s texts it is suggested that seeing with “an intellectual eye,” while very difficult, ultimately reveals that human language possesses a fixed, ideal, universal computational essence. Chomsky (1997a) remarks that while language may seem “imperfect” and messy when one considers it in the context of its external realization, “this apparent variety and complexity is superficial, reducing to minor parametric differences.” The reason language appears “imperfect” is that it must be materialized in the sensorimotor system:

A large range of imperfections may have to do with the need to “externalize” language. If we could communicate by telepathy, they would not arise. The phonological component is in a certain sense “extrinsic” to language, and the locus of a good part of its imperfection. (Chomsky, 1997a)

Chomsky associates “imperfection,” and deviation from the ideal, with the body, and with the requirement that language be materialized. He suggests that from the proper perspective the underlying internal ideal can be seen. In “Minimalist Explorations” Chomsky (1995) states that “the one unique computational process” would become apparent “if we could think and communicate by telepathy” and jokes that “if you were God” it would be obvious that the imperfections of language result from the vagaries of its physical realization. Similarly, Chomsky (1993) writes that the “computational system” underlying language is invariant, and it follows that “there is only one human language, as a rational Martian observing humans would have assumed” (p. 50). The figure of the Martian scientist features prominently in Chomsky’s discussions of the perspective required to perceive ideal knowledge. In “Models, Nature and Language” he states:

There is fairly good reason now to believe that in a certain, rather deep sense, there is only one human language. If a Martian scientist looked at us the way that we look at frogs he might well conclude that with marginal, minor modifications, there is only one language. You and I might say “tree,” and a German would say “baum,” but we’re using basically the same concepts from the same inventory, which is both rich and restrictive. (Chomsky, 1994, p. 173)

Several aspects of the language Chomsky uses to represent ideal knowledge are worth noting. Knowledge is associated with the language of spectatorial epistemology. Chomsky’s invocation of the “Eye of the mind,” the “intellectual eye,” the scientist looking at a frog, and the Martian scientist observing human language suggest that ideal knowledge consists of a complete view of a conceptual object and its component parts. Ideal knowledge is characterized by what Rorty describes as the visualist “wish to see the world from above,” by the desire for a vantage point which will provide synoptic overview (Rorty, 1993, p. 338). The aim of linguistic inquiry in its ideal form is to come to know language in terms of the perceptual and epistemological ideals frequently associated with vision, which, as Keller and Grontowski note, are subject–object duality, distance, corporeal transcendence, objectivity, transparency and immediacy (Keller and Grontowski, 1983, p. 221).

Let us consider the last of these two ideals, transparency and immediacy, as they bear most directly on Chomsky’s exclusion of rhetoric from linguistics, and his desire to arrive at a language-independent explanation of language. The visual references Chomsky uses to represent ideal knowledge suggest that knowledge entails perceiving an object that pre-exists inquiry, something “observed” rather than “made,” and thus that knowledge does not involve the active, situated, discursively mediated construction of a disciplinary object. Consider, for example, the figure of the Martian scientist “observing humans,” a stock character in Chomsky’s discussions of objective, ideal knowledge. The Martian’s knowledge is presumably superior precisely because it is not embedded in human culture and language, and because it occurs instantaneously, “at a glance,” without mediation. If the Martian in this thought experiment must achieve knowledge of human language through its own Martian language, a language embedded in specific forms of cultural

and social life, then it is hard to understand how such knowledge avoids the problems that befall less perfect forms of knowledge. Searle's critique of the Martian scientist as exemplar of ideal knowledge can be read as supporting the interpretation I have offered:

Let us start with Chomsky's idea of a neutral Martian scientist arriving on Earth and finding our languages an object of study for "natural science." The point of imagining a Martian, he said, is to free us of our local prejudices. The scientist will find that we all speak the same language, except "at the margins" . . . Does that sound right to you? It doesn't to me. First, any such scientist has to have a language of her, his, or its own. No language, no science. So the scientist's first step is to compare our languages with her own. (Searle, 2002, p. 34)

The ideal of the neutral Martian scientist observing humans presupposes that transparent, direct, unmediated knowledge and communication are possible. It is only by imagining Martian knowledge as akin to visual perception, as a form of understanding that avoids involvement, interaction and linguistic mediation that it can be considered ideal. In this regard Chomsky's theoretical commitments are closely connected to the way vision has been culturally constructed, and to the specific material properties assigned it in the context of its use as a metaphor for knowledge. It is vision's apparent immediacy, directness, lack of dependence on a medium and non-involvement with the object being perceived that make it, in Aristotle's words, "the most noble sense."<sup>6</sup> As Rorty notes, the ideal to which visualist representations of knowledge commonly aspire is "an immediacy which would make discourse and description superfluous" (Rorty, 1993, p. 375), and this ideal is apparent throughout Chomsky's writings.<sup>7</sup> Indeed, Jay suggests that ocularcentric discourses have been distinguished since their emergence in classical Greek philosophy by the disavowal of rhetoric and the relegation of language to transparent window onto, or mirror of, the object of inquiry (Jay, 1993, p. 33). Chomsky's reliance on visual tropes signals the degree to which his work privileges immediacy and transparency and is shaped by the disavowal and exclusion of rhetoric. Chomsky's linguistics is inflected by the continual effort to escape the communicative medium in which it operates, to avoid the need for language to talk about language. It constructs a conceptual gaze that can only be cast

<sup>6</sup> In "The Nobility of Sight: A Study in the Phenomenology of the Senses" Hans Jonas (1966) undertakes a phenomenological investigation of the privileging of sight in Aristotelian philosophy, as well as in philosophical discourse more generally, tracing out the epistemological implications of ocular metaphors.

<sup>7</sup> Immediacy and transparency are associated not just with ideal knowledge, but also with language in its ideal form. Consider, for example, Chomsky's suggestion that the underlying unity and perfection of language would become apparent if humans could "communicate by telepathy." Depicting ideal language as direct, immediate, transparent and disembodied reveals a visual bias. Chomsky's arguments for semantic universalism are also articulated in a visualist rhetoric that privileges immediacy and transparency. Chomsky proposes that concepts are innate, and have a universal, culture-independent character (Chomsky, 2000, pp. 65–66). He supports this position with examples such as the following: "You and I might say 'tree,' and a German would say 'baum,' but we're using basically the same concepts from the same inventory" (Chomsky, 1994, p. 173). The plausibility of this example rests on an implicit appeal to the universality of thought and language understood in terms of visual perception. It presupposes that when an English speaker hears the word "tree," she has in mind a mental image that can be compared and found equivalent to the German word "baum". Chomsky thus assumes that words and sentences function primarily as pictures, in accordance with Aristotle's visualist dictum that "words are the image of thought." Such a model of language clearly depends on an assumed equivalence between thought, knowledge and vision – if, for example, we imagine thought and knowledge in terms of an alternative set of modal metaphors such as taste or smell, the plausibility of a universal conceptual system appears less convincing.

“through” and never “at” linguistic discourse, which is say that it must remain blind to rhetoric.

### 3.2. *Visual tropes and the rhetoric of undeniability*

Chomsky is justly famous for his skill in debating opponents, and for his ability to construct powerful rebuttals. Yet one of the most rhetorically distinctive characteristics of these rebuttals – the use of visual analogies, metaphors and examples – appears to have gone unnoticed by both critics and admirers. The counterarguments and refutations presented by Chomsky repeatedly draw on references to vision and visual perception. For example, when arguing against the notion that linguistic rules are cultural and variable, and that linguistic meaning is conventional and context-dependent, Chomsky writes that a language user

cannot choose to have sentences mean other than what they do, any more than he can choose to have objects distributed in perceptual space otherwise than the way they are . . . we share rules of language with others as we share an organization of visual space with them. (Chomsky, 1975, p. 71)

Throughout *Rules and Representations*, Chomsky replies to criticisms of the methodology of generative linguistics, including its reliance on abstraction, idealized conditions, and idealized data, by arguing that similar charges could conceivably be made of studies of vision, yet this would not undermine work on the visual system carried out by researchers such as David Marr. Chomsky concludes that since language is the same kind of object as the visual system, such criticisms are equally irrelevant for generative linguistics. In response to Hilary Putnam’s objection that he presents too strong a version of innateness and assigns learning a completely marginal role in language acquisition, Chomsky writes, “[Putnam] makes the tacit assumption that language is cognitive in a way that vision is not, and hence that discussions of language have to meet additional criteria of adequacy” (p. 172). In *Knowledge of Language* Chomsky engages the critiques of cognitivists whose theories of language and mind draw on connectionist models. His response to connectionist opponents consists of the charge that vision cannot be explained without reference to innate mechanisms and preexisting structure, yet they try to do so with language: “Again the refusal to treat the development of language as parallel in terms of its genetic determinants to the development of vision is left unmotivated” (p. 173). Chomsky argues against functional approaches to linguistic inquiry with this memorable riposte: “The child does not acquire the rule by virtue of its function any more than he learns to have an eye because of the advantage of sight” (Chomsky, 1980, p. 231). And when arguing against the notion that language is socially constructed, Chomsky fashions rebuttals such as the following:

Have we, as individuals, “made” our language? That is, have you or I “made” English? That seems either senseless or wrong. We had no choice at all as to the language we acquired . . . there is no more reason to think of language as “made” than there is to think of the human visual system and the various forms that it assumes as “made by us.” (Chomsky, 1980, p. 11)

For Chomsky, language is self-evidently the same kind of object as the visual system, and since we do not “make” our visual faculties, it is equally absurd to imagine that

language is in any meaningful sense constructed by its users. Chomsky's rebuttals often take the form of such reminders of that which is obviously true and irrefutable. Chomsky's appeals to the certainty of visual perception thus function as what Potter et al. call an "undeniability device." That is, references to vision constitute a rhetorical strategy designed to establish beyond any doubt the existence of a brute reality, something external to talk. Like hitting the furniture, kicking a rock, invoking death, power or suffering, Chomsky's statements about the distribution of objects in "perceptual space" (in other words, the undeniability of what we see) are used to establish that which cannot be refuted, a "bottom line" that emphasizes "limits to the flexibility of descriptions" (Potter et al., 1994, p. 2). Potter et al. analyze some of the most common such devices, arguing that each inevitably fails in its attempt to escape representation. In a discussion of the "furniture argument" they write: "The realist thumps the table. What a loud noise! Much louder than talk. Much more gritty. Much more real. And yet we insist that this noise, being produced in *this* place, at *this* time, in the course of *this* argument, *is* an argument, *is* talk." (p. 4)

Potter et al. go on to outline some of the rhetorical strategies such arguments entail:

The Furniture argument, as the argument of no argument, purports to be the one that ends the rhetoric, is above rhetoric, and demonstrates its limits: it is "the naked truth," unconstructed, unsupported, unclothed, needing no allies. The counter to this is to name it as a device, a rhetorical construct, occasioned and deployed. For example, we can place it amongst a set of similar devices for accomplishing undeniability. In discourse, the Furniture device shares features with other rhetorical ploys that, difficult to undermine in themselves, are deployed as shields behind which some rather more vulnerable entity is placed; thus positioned, they lend their robustness to some more contentious issue. (p. 3)

Chomsky's appeals to the undeniability of visual perception might similarly be dubbed "the Vision argument." References to vision function to shield the "more vulnerable entity" of language, or more precisely Chomsky's representation of language, in order to establish it as certain, true and self-evident, and thus beyond argument. Chomsky's argument is, in a sense, that no argument is necessary; as long as one is willing to trust one's eyes and admit the truth, one will be persuaded. Such a position appears consistent with Chomsky's statement that "one should not try to persuade," and that "the best rhetoric is the least rhetoric." However, as rhetoricians have long pointed out, the best rhetoric is rarely the least rhetoric, but more often the least obvious, most artfully fashioned rhetoric. This is in fact precisely the strategy Chomsky adopts. Chomsky's use of visual analogies and examples to rebut his opponents is, of course, a rhetorical move designed to persuade. Most obviously, it is a rhetorical move that trades on the cultural values of certainty, transparency and objectivity often associated with visual perception; on the equivalence Chomsky constructs in his writings between language and vision,<sup>8</sup> and as De Beaugrande (1991a,b) notes, on Chomsky's creative re-description of scientific research

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<sup>8</sup> Note, for example, the equivalence constructed between language and vision in statements such as "[it is] useful and appropriate to think of the human visual system *or* human language as analogous to an organ or bodily system" (italics added).

on vision in terms of the concepts and categories of generativism. Chomsky's statement that one should not persuade is itself an artful piece of rhetoric. It is followed by the rather pious injunction that rhetoric and persuasion should be renounced, despite the fact that this will make one less successful in persuading an audience, because to do otherwise would be "authoritarian." Yet as de Beaugrande remarks in a response to Chomsky's interview, by describing his work as merely "laying out the territory," by presenting his position not as argument but as truth, and by suggesting that those who disagree with him fail to see what is certain and self-evident, Chomsky practices an authoritarian rhetoric marshaled in favor of a particular approach to the study of language (De Beaugrande 1991, p. 111). Furthermore, Chomsky's renunciation of rhetoric, framed as a principled commitment to avoid manipulation of an audience, helps construct an ethos of impartiality, honesty and humility – and thus persuade. He rejects rhetoric only to rely on its resources at every turn in his writing. Like Plato, Chomsky attacks rhetoric while remaining one of its most skilled practitioners. Contrary to the claim Chomsky makes in the interview with Olson and Faigley, no scholar communicates neutrally and transparently, without the need or desire to persuade. As Nelson et al. (1987) state, "Every scientist or scholar, regardless of field, relies on common devices of rhetoric: on metaphors, invocations of authority, and appeals to audiences – themselves creatures of rhetoric" (p. 4).

#### 4. Toward a more reflexive, rhetorically self-conscious linguistics

We shall not cease from exploration  
 And the end of all our exploring  
 Will be to arrive where we started  
 And know the place for the first time.  
 T.S. Eliot, "Four Quartets"

What might a more reflexive, rhetorically self-conscious linguistics look like? Given the diversity of practices that characterize rhetorical studies, the different ways that "reflexivity" has been theorized, and the many different areas of linguistic scholarship that exist, such a question raises a complex set of issues and possibilities.<sup>9</sup> I will thus confine myself to general remarks, to providing a few examples of contemporary work in linguistics that moves in the direction of reflexivity and rhetorical awareness, and describe some possible implications for linguistics and rhetorical studies.

<sup>9</sup> Latour defines reflexivity in very general terms as denoting "any text that takes into account its own production" (Latour, 1988, p. 2). However, differing definitions of how texts are produced and how to understand the conditions of their production have given rise to many different understandings of reflexivity. There are autobiographical and confessional approaches that focus on the personal context of the individual researcher, as well those that center on textual arrangements and authorial voice. There are also deconstructive, critical theory-based and institutional approaches. For helpful reviews of competing definitions of reflexivity see Foley (2002) and Hopper (1995). For a thoughtful discussion of the inevitable tension between reflexivity and persuasion see Liu (1995).

One of the most commonly made arguments regarding the value of increased rhetorical self-consciousness in disciplinary scholarship is that attention to the figurative, suasive and formative aspects of disciplinary discourse increases self-awareness about the conditions and limits of knowledge production, fosters epistemological humility and intellectual openness, and may enable greater scholarly flexibility and creativity. Such a position is articulated by McCloskey in relation to the rhetoric of economics. McCloskey defines rhetorical self-consciousness as “the ability to toggle between looking at and looking through a text,” and suggests that such a stance has a number of benefits (McCloskey, 1994, p. 293). McCloskey argues that a “rhetorical economics” that reflects on and makes explicit its choice of narrative and metaphor will be more self-aware, verifiable, accessible, and less “immoderate” in its claims than traditional “formalist” approaches (McCloskey, 1990, p. 90). She proposes that such a reorientation of economic inquiry will help economists stand back and scrutinize the rhetorical and figurative resources they employ – what these resources reveal and conceal, what they foreground and background, and how they inform arguments and assumptions.

There are interesting parallels between the argument presented by McCloskey and statements made by scholars within the cognitive linguistics movement. Cognitive linguistics investigates form and meaning in terms of embodied cognitive processes, categorization strategies, and cultural, contextual and functional factors. Figurative resources such as metaphor and metonymy are of particular interest to cognitive linguists as they are thought to reveal conceptual structures at the core of human thought. Some prominent cognitive linguists, including figures such as Lakoff, Johnson, and Palmer, consider their own rhetoric as an object of self-reflexive scrutiny, and reflect on the tropes, root metaphors, analogies and forms of argument they use. For example, in “Philosophy in the Flesh: A Talk with George Lakoff,” Lakoff (1999) reflects explicitly on the computational metaphors he employs, and on their uses and limits:

Metaphors for the mind, as you say, have evolved over time – from machines to switchboards to computers. There’s no avoiding metaphor in science. In our lab, we use the Neural Circuitry metaphor ubiquitous throughout neuroscience. If you’re studying neural computation, that metaphor is necessary. In the day to day research on the details of neural computation, the biological brain moves into the background while the Neural Circuitry introduced by the metaphor is what one works with. But no matter how ubiquitous a metaphor may be, it is important to keep track of what it hides and what it introduces.

Lakoff’s writings are characterized by a significant degree of such rhetorical self-consciousness, by what McCloskey calls a “toggling sensibility.” It must be acknowledged that Lakoff, like McCloskey, does not propose that this sensibility will have profound implications for the conduct of disciplinary inquiry (a point I will return to shortly). Nonetheless, the benefits of even such a modest degree of rhetorical self-awareness can perhaps be seen if we compare Lakoff’s reflexive attention to the computational metaphors that inform his work Chomsky’s – specifically, with a serious problem Chomsky encounters reconciling computer metaphors with biology. Like Lakoff, Chomsky draws heavily on the figure of the computer in his representations of language. For example, Chomsky talks of the “rule-governed, algorithmic, digital character of syntax,” and defines language as “a computational–representational system based on digital computation with recursive enumeration and many other specific properties. The system appears to be surprisingly

elegant, possibly observing conditions of non-redundancy, global ‘least effort’ conditions, and so on” (Chomsky, 1993, p. 26; Chomsky, 1991c, p. 50).<sup>10</sup> Chomsky also wishes to argue that language is a “biological system.” Yet he acknowledges that there are troubling differences between biological systems and the computational qualities he assigns language. He states, “Language is, at its core, a system that is both digital and infinite. To my knowledge, there is no other biological system with these properties” (Chomsky, 1991c, p. 50). Chomsky concedes further that qualities such as elegance and non-redundancy are rare in biology (“Typically, biological systems are not like this at all. They are highly redundant, for reasons that have a plausible functional account” 49). The implications are potentially troubling. Chomsky writes, “Why language should be so different from other biological systems is a problem, possibly even a mystery” (pp. 49–50). However, this “intractable” problem emerges in part because the figure of the computer is literalized in Chomsky’s writings. Metaphor becomes identity. Chomsky’s ocularcentric, anti-rhetorical valorization of transparency, his deep suspicion of the “body” of language – as disciplinary discourse and as object of analysis – limits his ability to reflect on the Burkean “scenic scope” that accompanies any set of figures or terms. The “mystery” Chomsky describes might be less confounding if, as Lakoff and McCloskey advocate, he were more inclined to reflect on the nature, uses and limits of the figurative resources he employs, and perhaps even consider the inventive possibilities suggested by alternative tropes.

The form of rhetorical awareness advocated by McCloskey has received some criticism for its limited scope, for the suggestion that disciplinary inquiry will not be significantly changed by attention to its rhetoric. For example, Quinn argues that McCloskey’s “rhetorical economics” implies only that we “go on doing what we have been doing, enlightened by our brush with rhetoric,” more self-aware, modest, and flexible (Quinn, 1996, p. 1129). Such a charge could also be leveled at Lakoff, for whom the implications of reflexive scrutiny of linguistic discourse are also relatively modest.<sup>11</sup> Lakoff and Johnson adopt what they call “embodied realism” in an attempt to chart a “third alternative” between empiricism and rationalism on the one hand, and realism and postmodernism on the other (Lakoff and Johnson, 2002, p. 248). This results in what might be called a “light,” naturalized social constructionism in which language and the social take a back seat to physiology, cognition and science. For cognitive linguists the formative power of language is explained largely in terms of embodied cognition, and the re-describability of linguistic

<sup>10</sup> Chomskyan linguistics embodies many of the characteristics of the Von Neuman model of computing. These characteristics include recursion, iteration, sequentiality, modularity, efficiency and non-redundancy. By contrast, cognitive linguistics draws on connectionist computational models. These models emphasize distribution, emergence, dynamism and prototypicality, and are more tolerant of variation, redundancy and “inefficiency” – features that cognitive linguists argue make their research more biologically plausible than Chomsky’s. Boyd has written that “a concern with exploring analogies, or similarities, between men and computational devices has been the most important single factor influencing post-behaviorist cognitive psychology. Even among cognitive psychologists who despair of the actual machine simulation of human cognition, computer metaphors have an indispensable role in the formulation and articulation of theoretical positions” (Boyd, 1981, p. 360). Something very similar applies to cognitive approaches to language, and thus to both Chomskyan and cognitive linguistics.

<sup>11</sup> Werry (2005) explores why, despite statements that suggest a reflexive stance, and an interest in looking ‘at’ as well as ‘through’ linguistic discourse, cognitive linguistics has not proceeded far in this direction. The paper suggests that the main reasons for this involve the assumption of a transcendental subject; a heavy emphasis on cognition; the assumption that language functions primarily as a reflection of cognition; the reliance on computer models, the naturalization of language, and the commitment to linguistics as natural science.

facts is only weakly related to culture and discourse. Linguistics still functions as a scientific mirror of “the actual facts” of language.

There are some emerging areas of linguistic inquiry which adopt “stronger” forms of rhetorical self-consciousness, which take seriously Williams’ statement that “All categories, including the category ‘language,’ are themselves constructions in language.”<sup>12</sup> This work is characterized by a number of themes that follow from a more reflexive stance: interest in language *and* linguistic inquiry as social constructions whose relationship must be explicitly theorized; re-description of many of the taken-for-granted categories that anchor traditional linguistic analyses; attention to the political and ethical dimensions of language construction, and reflection on the role that technologies of communication play in the shaping and conceptualization of language. Integrational linguistics is an important example of such an emerging area of inquiry. A central tenet of integrational linguistics is that both language users and theorizers are “language makers.” Taylor, for example, argues that the reflexive, metalinguistic properties of language play an important role in shaping the language linguists analyze (“Language is always already the subject of prior conceptualizations, prior analyses, and prior explanations – long before the linguist get his hands on it”. Taylor, 1997a, p. 3). He considers how the reflexive linguistic practices carried out by language users – talk about talk – contribute to the acquisition and structuration of language (Taylor, 2000). Taylor suggests that if one conceptualizes language as a reflexively enculturated phenomenon, and linguistics as itself a form of reflexive “metadiscourse,” then one must change one’s picture of both the nature of linguistic knowledge and the central objects of linguistic analysis. He calls for critical engagement with “the discursive mechanics of the linguist’s representation of language,” and in particular with “the rhetorical means” by which she weaves “concepts, premises, evidence, and observations into an argument” (Taylor, 1997a, p. 4). One example of such an examination of “rhetorical means” involves a twofold focus on the “body” of language – the figures used to represent language and the role that technological embodiment and literate practice play in the categories and concepts constructed by linguists. In this vein Harris has explored the use of scriptural and computational metaphors and models in formal theories of language and has also examined how technologies of communication are involved in the construction of units, categories and concepts for representing spoken communication (Harris, 1987, 2000). Integrational linguistics is also committed to making explicit the ethical and political implications of theory construction, which Taylor notes follows directly from its understanding of linguistics as a form of “language making” invested with particular cultural authority (Taylor, 1997a, p. 4).

A convergent set of concerns and commitments can be found in recent work that examines grammar as an emergent, socially situated, dialogic phenomenon. Hopper provides the clearest example of such work.<sup>13</sup> Hopper’s writings are marked by rhetorical

<sup>12</sup> I focus here on integrational and “emergentist” approaches to language. Other areas that display some interest in rhetorical self-consciousness are: critical discourse analysis (but see Bucholtz’s (2001) critique of the limits of this); anthropological linguistics, especially the work of Hanks, Tyler and Becker, and *Critical English for Academic Purposes* (see especially Benesch’s (2001) *Critical English for Academic Purposes*). However, with the exception of anthropological linguistics much of this work consists of calls for increased reflexivity and rhetorical self-consciousness rather than its actual practice.

<sup>13</sup> Other linguists who carry out similar research include Thompson, Ochs and Traugott. Their work is difficult to classify, traversing such related areas as functional linguistics, pragmatics, grammaticalization and interactional grammar, but is broadly centered on examining linguistic structure in terms of its connections to culture, interaction and communicative function.

self-consciousness and an interest in situating both linguistic structure and linguistic discourse in terms of their connections to culture, interaction and communicative function. His work on Emergent Grammar and grammaticalization considers linguistic form “in its temporal unfolding . . . *in mediis rebus*, in the midst of the social scenes of its creation” (Hopper, 1992a, p. 227). Hopper is interested in how grammatical structure emerges from the stitching together of ready made forms such as idioms, formulas, proverbs, clichés, transitional phrases and other routinized expressions; from text building devices and communicative strategies such as narration, topicalization and framing, and from the creative, contextual, real-time improvisations of language users. Hopper writes that this project reconceives “grammar as nothing other than the micro-end of rhetoric.” Grammar is redefined as “rhetoric seen in small-scale parts of interactions such as phrases, words, and even parts of words as these become sedimented through frequent use in particular contexts” (Hopper, 1998, p. 170). Hopper’s work is also characterized by sensitivity to the rhetoric of linguistics. He reflects on the representational practices that are an inevitable part of the entextualization of data, examines the genealogy and rhetorical construction of standard categories such as “sentence,” “noun” and “verb,” and argues that “there are no ‘non-rhetorical’ definitions” (Hopper, 1998, p. 156; Hopper, 1997; Hopper, 1992a, p. 233). Hopper (1992b) has also proposed a rhetorical linguistics that would operate at several different levels of generality, from examining the contribution of state institutions, dictionaries and written grammars to communicative practice and concepts of language, to investigating the institutional and disciplinary contexts of linguistic knowledge production, to analyzing the genres, categories, concepts, data and methods employed.

Both “strong” and “light” forms of rhetorical self-consciousness may serve to deepen the growing engagement with culture, context, power and temporality identifiable in contemporary linguistics. They may also contribute to increased contact between linguistics and neighboring disciplines, as linguistics finds itself engaged in a discussion about disciplinary discourse that resonates with conversations that have been ongoing in the humanities and social sciences for some time now. The two trends I have described both appear to signal an emerging interest in rhetoric. However, there are potential differences in the nature of this interest, and in the kinds of engagement with rhetorical studies that may be possible. Cognitive linguistics, by some accounts the fastest growing branch of linguistics, has been taken up by scholars in fields such as anthropology and literary studies, and Philip Eubanks has explored the usefulness of several of its practitioners to rhetorical studies (*War of Words*). Cognitive linguistics has proven a particularly rich source of concepts for scholars studying metaphor. However, the traffic in ideas has been mostly one-way, with humanities scholars adapting the work of figures such as Lakoff and Johnson, while cognitive linguists find much less use for work in the humanities. This may change as some researchers within cognitive linguistics continue to call for greater attention to culture, discourse and context.<sup>14</sup> For now the prospects seem limited. Consider, for example, remarks made by Turner, on the usefulness of rhetoric to his proposed project of cognitive social science. He writes that despite its rich intellectual tradition, rhetoric “has fallen on abject

<sup>14</sup> Such critiques have come mostly from anthropologists who draw on cognitive linguists. For example, Palmer charges that cognitive linguistics needs to pay more attention to “culture, discourse, narrative, and world view,” (Palmer, 1996, p. 33) and Quinn charges that cognitive approaches “neglect altogether the organizing role of culture in human thought, or grant culture, at best, a residual or epiphenomenal place in their accounts” (Quinn, 1991, p. 57). A related critique is made from a rhetorical perspective by Eubanks (2000).

and humiliating circumstances,” and is now associated “not with research but with fraud, poverty, and the humanities.” Turner writes that “we cannot afford these connotations,” and must instead seek to be associated with “bold scientific research, emerging syntheses, new paradigms, wealth, rigor, power, truth” (Turner, 2001, p. 154).

By contrast, the work of linguists who adopt a “strong” form of rhetorical self-consciousness suggests that a more dialogic relationship between linguistics and rhetoric may be possible. Scholars such as Taylor and Hopper, who draw linguistics closer to rhetoric in terms of research interests and underlying assumptions, open up potential points of contact, convergence and exchange between the two areas. Rhetoricians may benefit from engaging, absorbing and developing the work of integrational and emergentist linguistics. For example, a rhetoricized approach to the grammatical microstructure of language may complement and perhaps even enrich the traditionally “higher” level categories rhetoricians work with. Hopper’s re-description of grammar as “nothing other than the micro-end of rhetoric” may have significant pedagogic possibilities. Similarly, linguistics may benefit from attention to its rhetoric. *Contra* Chomsky, the best linguistic rhetoric may in fact be the most self-aware variety, and closer attention to this essential aspect of disciplinary inquiry may yield new understandings of where linguistics stands and what new directions it might travel in.

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