

CRITICAL REFLECTIONS ON GENERATIVE GRAMMAR. By Claude Hagège, translated by Robert A. Hall Jr., Edward Sapir Monograph Series in Language, Culture, and Cognition, 10. Lake Bluff, Illinois: Jupiter Press 1981, vii + 196 pp., \$12.00.

*Reviewed by James Kilbury
Technical University of Berlin*

Hagège intends his book as a critical examination of generative grammar and not as an introduction. The reader in fact needs to be quite familiar with generative grammar already in order to follow the criticisms, which cover a very wide range of topics. Such background knowledge is essential because Hagège states his criticisms directly without presenting the motivation or viewpoint behind the works criticized.

It is important to note that this book is a translation (with changes and corrections) of the French edition, which appeared in 1976. Although additions were made to the extensive bibliography, it was impossible for the author to take the rapid developments between 1976 and 1981, in particular, Chomsky's recent works on syntax, into account.

According to Hagège the book "is essentially aimed at stating the reasons for my objections to transformational-generative grammar in its three aspects: as a scientific theory applied to the study of human language; as a model of linguistic analysis and description; and as a sociological-historical phenomenon" (p. 3). Accordingly, after a Foreword and a preface to the English Translation, the book contains chapters on "The Intellectual and Social Frame-Work" (pp. 5-35), "Linguistics and Science in the Generativist Vision" (pp. 36-67), "Operations and Levels" (pp. 68-123), and "Formal Procedures and Theoretical Implications" (pp. 124-164). Hagège ends the book with a section "Non-Conclusion" followed by an Appendix, Bibliography, Index of Languages, and Index of Principal Topics. The appendix (pp. 167-171) contains short quotations from letters to the author from Anttila, Bolinger, Gleason, Hetzron, Hockett, Ikegami, A. Makkai, Mel'čuk, Nida, Pike, and Pilch. Footnotes take up 38 of the 167 pages of main text (i.e., 23%), which detracts from the book's readability.

Hagège is to be commended for the breadth of the literature he covers and for the numerous linguistic examples, interesting in themselves, that he uses in

presenting his criticisms. I am especially grateful for his description, buried in a footnote (p. 30), of the difficulties surrounding the publication of Wade Baskin's English translation of Saussure's *Cours*. Hagège's book contains a wealth of such information, and I see its main strength therein. Many of the individual criticisms of generative grammar. He regards its formalization as a "fetish" (p. 124) that frequently supports his criticisms with quotations from linguists like McCawley (cf. p. 157), who are themselves closely identified with generative grammar. Hagège should be more explicit about how he delimits generative grammar and its proponents.

Readers who have already made up their minds for or against generative grammar will ignore or welcome the book, respectively. Unfortunately, I feel that other readers are likely to be disappointed. Charles Hockett directed my own graduate studies, and I feel sympathetic to the ideas and people of linguistics before 1957. To my regret, Hagège's book struck me as tedious and depressing despite its positive qualities. Hagège dissociates himself from the "bitterness or polemicizing" (p. 3) of some passages quoted in the appendix but then proceeds to speak of Chomsky and his "henchmen" (p. 14), whose work "occasionally manifests certain characteristics of an amiable dilettantism" (p. 21). Hagège finds it "important to stress that sharing Chomsky's political views should by no means lead one to approve uncritically of his theory of language" (p. 26), and the translator, Robert A. Hall Jr., adds in a footnote that "so many 'radical'-oriented, constitutionally intolerant types [JK: How many? Who? How does he know?] went into linguistics under his banner because they were attracted by his political views" (p. 29). Hagège quotes other linguists to depict the generativist "reign of terror" (p. 99), which leads to "a delightful game, in which we no longer care whether we are in agreement with linguistic facts" (p. 11). I find all of these passages obnoxious and utterly repellent. MUST linguists continue to perform such acts in public? MUST scholarly publications be misused for diatribes that cast the whole community of linguists into discredit for failing to put an end to the outbursts? A charming, elderly Hungarian secretary at my former department in Austria once remarked that in her father's day there would not have been embarrassing public fights between the professors; "there would have been a duel, and one would have shot the other." Where people's use of reason has failed so miserably as in the quarter-century debate over generative grammar, it is seductive to think that physical violence, at least, might offer a solution.

I am especially provoked by the fresh-from-Sunday-school innocence with which Hagège makes insinuations and personal attacks. The reader is presented with the picture of a group of gentlemen bubbling over with decency and impeccability (the non-TG-ers) that is suddenly and inexplicably attacked by a pack of mad dogs (the TG-ers). Modern psychology has convincingly shown that it takes

two to tango, and linguists who closely identify with Hagège's position, especially those linguists directly involved in the conflicts, should search in themselves for ways in which they may also have contributed to the conflicts and misunderstandings.

Aside from the unfortunate polemic dimension, broad sections of the book make me think that Hagège has not understood some of the fundamental aims of generative grammar. He regards its formalization as a "fetish" (p. 124) that "is not applicable everywhere nor to the same extent unless one believes in the real explanatory power of the magic formulas which one has conjured up in great number" (p. 138). Hagège asks (pp. 127-128), "What has been gained, since, far from bringing to light deeper correspondences which **explain** the whole situation, all that has been done is to continue to **describe**, by replacing a paragraph of traditional grammar by a formula which says the same thing in a code which the reader has to learn?" I would like to attempt a partial answer.

My study of computer science in the past few years has shown me the enormous significance of Chomsky's work for the development and description of programming languages for computers. Chomsky would retain a major position in modern scholarship even if he had written nothing about natural language. Hagège notes that "Chomsky starts, not from an investigation of units, but from the requirements which a grammar should satisfy, and therefore from the characterization of the latter" (p. 38). After defining grammars as mathematical structures, Chomsky showed that there are classes of grammars which are inherently incapable of describing certain classes of formal languages. In fact, he discovered a hierarchy of grammar types that corresponds to matching hierarchies of formal language types and types of automata that recognize or parse the corresponding languages. If we can establish that a grammar of a given type (position in the hierarchy) and corresponding power is adequate for generating or characterizing the sentences of a formal language, and if we furthermore can show that any grammar of lesser power is inadequate, then we have established an essential property of the formal language itself.

Chomsky applied the same reasoning to natural languages. I am well aware of the differences between natural language and formal languages, but their common features are also important. He presented arguments (that have recently been rejected by linguists like Gerald Gazdar) that a grammar consisting exclusively of context-free phrase-structure rules is incapable of adequately characterizing the syntactic structure of sentences in natural language. He then proposed a grammar consisting of a component of phrase-structure rules that generate syntactic trees (initial phrase markers or deep structures) and a component of transformation rules that map such trees into others (surface structures). Later investigations showed that transformations of the original sort have unrestricted power, and recent

research has attempted to restrict the power of transformations or to eliminate the latter altogether. The goal remains that of determining the formal properties of a grammar that is powerful enough to describe, characterize, or generate a natural language and that is no more powerful than necessary. An informal description of linguistic phenomena may be important and useful for many purposes, but that is irrelevant here. The general refusal to formalize grammars in a way that allows the investigation of their mathematical properties is not an alternative but simply an evasion of the question that Chomsky has posed. Linguists who entirely discount the significance of this problem have, in my opinion, missed out on one of the most exciting intellectual developments of the past thirty years.