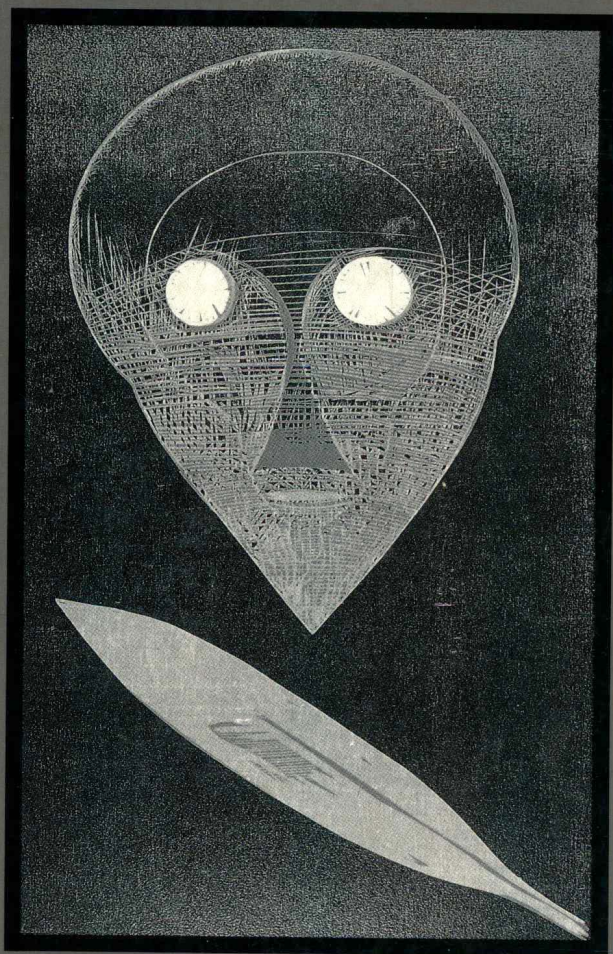

CHALLENGING CHOMSKY

The Generative Garden Game

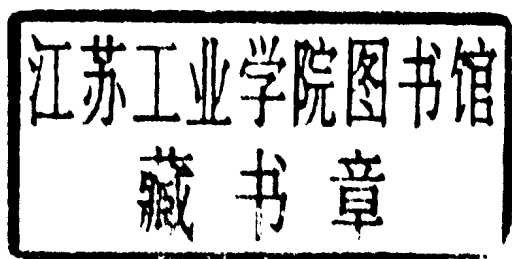


Rudolf P. Botha

Challenging Chomsky

The Generative Garden Game

Rudolf P. Botha



Basil Blackwell

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This setting of human beings to kill one another in public, for entertainment, is by far the nastiest blood-sport ever invented.

Michael Grant, *Gladiators*, p. 8

'I was hoping that you, at least, would understand the appeal of the thing [i.e., the pitting of man against man in a maze]', he said at length. 'However . . . ' He paused again. 'To be honest,' he went on slowly, 'I'm not sure I wholly understand – myself – the deep attraction of the Game . . . I suppose the Game gives us the feeling of getting close to the roots of our profession . . . getting down to the fundamentals. . . . '

Jon Manchip White, *The Garden Game*, p. 102

The perceived need to outdo Chomsky has led him to be the most attacked linguist in history.

Newmeyer, 'Has there been a "Chomskyan revolution" in linguistics?'

Chomsky has rarely been defeated in argument on his own ground . . .

Gardner, *The Mind's New Science*, p. 214

The first essay [in *Rules and Representations*] and indeed much of the book provides us with critical examples illustrating the subtly controlled aggressive component of Chomsky's rhetoric and style . . .

Brame, 'Universal word induction vs Move α '

Bloodsports, it is generally believed, are on the wane. But not so The Generative Garden Game.

Anonymous

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R.P.B.

The author and publishers are grateful to Noam Chomsky who generously granted permission to quote from his published works; also for permission to quote from N. Chomsky, *The Generative Enterprise. A Discussion with R. Huybregts and H. van Riemsdijk* (Foris Publications, 1982).

Forewarning

So you have heard about The Garden, Dear Reader. And you wish to challenge The Master at his Game. Boldly you aim to stalk him in his sprawling maze of forking and intersecting conceptual lanes. I say 'boldly' because, as you ought to know, the odds are against you. For years The Master has been playing The Game with superb – some would say, deadly – skill. Many of intellectual class have come to do battle with The Master about his ideas on language and mind. With woeful consequences, alas! Some entered The Garden, never to reappear. (May their minds rest in peace!) Others left The Garden in undignified hurry – hurt and, for the rest of their scholarly days, humiliated. Only a few were able to draw blood, to force The Master to acknowledge a flaw here, to concede a defect there in the foundations of his model of language and mind.

But, believing yourself to be intellectually fleet of foot and strong of limb, you are not one to be deterred by the more sinister details of Garden lore. So, before setting out to engage The Master, let me take you on a guided tour of the maze of lanes and paths so cleverly laid out in dense New England intellectual growth. Come with me and get the feel of the conceptual forks and intersections, the logical pitfalls and perils, the methodological dead ends and drops (plunging down into the Charles). Forearmed with this experience, you will know better where to fight and where to flee, when to lunge and when to parry in real action. Perhaps, even, you will learn how to avoid perishing at the hands of The Master in his alluring but lethal linguistic labyrinth.

Be warned: there will be distractions in The Garden, other Players with their own pursuits. Of some you will catch a fleeting glimpse; others you will hear in the distance only – roaring with rage, shrieking with fright or moaning in agony. (I do not mean to scare

FOREWARNING

you, but take care not to trip over the odd bleached bone sticking out of shallow structure.)

There will be Fiery Fighters and Guileful Gladiators who, in their prime, have come to prove their powers, to match The Master. Then there will be various members of the Gored Old Guard – those constitutionally incurable cases of brawling brains – back to revenge the terrible traumas suffered in past encounters with The Master. And you will become aware of the presence of a number of Fickle Friends – erstwhile admirers who, for reasons of their own, have turned against The Master and now stalk him with dour determination.

Also there will be a few Fanatic Followers who – having found The Game too tame, The Master too mellow – clamour for the radical reconstruction of The Garden. Oh, and do be careful not to startle the Nosy Novices sent by tutors to The Garden, not to provoke The Master, but to look, to listen and, above all, to learn how to survive a future fight.

And you might bump into any of a number of Stray Souls who, forever losing their intellectual way, have stumbled into The Garden by chance. A motley bunch – including Phantom Philosophers, Senile Psychologists, Asinine Anthropologists, AI-idiot, Computer Cranks and Wizenod Whizz-kids of linguistic lineage – they would not know The Master from a maple. If they are permitted to loiter in the lanes, it is out of sheer charity. For reasons I need not mention, we won't concern ourselves with the capers of these clownish creatures. Before I forget, don't allow yourself to be distracted by the Flock of Frenzied Fans, metrically stamping their feet while cheering on their champ with the chant of 'Chomsky, Chomsky!'

Ultimately, of course, there is The Master: for ever patrolling the paths, modifying the maze – always ready to retaliate.

Why I call him 'The Master'? Certainly not out of subservience, servility or some other similarly silly sentiment. Nor for the want of a proper name. 'Great Generator', 'Garden Guru', 'Generative Genius' (or 'Genie', some would insist), 'Machiavellian Mentalist', 'Revengeful Rationalist' are but a few of the many names (by which) he has been called. 'The Master', however, says it all: it is he who has turned The Garden into a model maze, who has masterminded all major moves and manoeuvres, who has made The Garden the ground of the most magnificent matches in mentalist memory. But if the name touches a raw nerve or opens an old wound, please feel

free to read for 'The Master' a name of your own choice. Why not, for example, call him 'The Past Master (of The Maze)'?

Learning from the blunders, often crippling in their consequences, that have been committed by other Garden combatants is a must. To aid you in this, I will put up, as we move through the labyrinth, some signs marking places where in the past Plodding Players made misguided moves, selected suicidal stratagems, wielded weird weapons, or tumbled into treacherous traps. The inscriptions on these signs – e.g. 'The Milner Maneuver', 'Lemming Lane', 'The Bicycle Bifurcation', 'The Luria Lunge', 'Dennett's Decoy' and so on – I have taken, without permission, from The Master's memoirs, to be published at a distant date as The Life and Times of a Gladiatorial Grammarian.

But such mnemonic means won't see you through. Mobility of mind and agility in action – that's what The Game is all about. To give you a feel of this action, I will be making use of copious quotes from The Master's own writings and those of his adversaries. In this way, I will let you sense what it is like to be now in the shoes of the attacker, now in the shoes of the defender.

When playing for real, there is one thing never to forget: The Master is a mercurial mover. Don't rush a position where you saw a shadow some time ago. Chances are that you would be sailing into empty space, only to be attacked from an unexpected angle. And I won't recommend shooting from the hip: leave this to the Wild Men from the (Mid-) West. The Garden, after all, is in East Coast Country.

*'So what are the rules of The Game?', I hear you ask. What, indeed, are the rules? For survival there is just this one: 'Anything goes'. Ah, and do remember: you will be no more than a player; you will not be a referee too. So it won't be for you to decide whether or not you have landed a crippling blow that set The Master reeling. Nor will it be your prerogative to say that a savage swipe by The Master left you with only a surface scratch. The Spectators, callously calculating, will be both judge and jury. This is the Raw Reality of The Game. If you would prefer not to face it, there is still time to retreat to the challenge of Chinese Checkers.**

**If you happen to be a Serious Scholar – did I hear someone say 'Spoil Sport'? – who insists on a watered-down version of this Forewarning, Chinese Checkers is your fate. Or, what about a quiet game of conceptual croquet with your curate?*

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The Lie of the Land

Getting to The Garden is not as easy as it may seem, Pupil Player. Along the way, you will come, rather unexpectedly, to some perilously concealed conceptual forks. Make a wrong choice at any of these, and you are bound to end up, like many before you, in some remote playground where, in your own opinion, you may well be having lots of fun. But you won't be really playing The Game.

Incidentally, don't let the playful pitch of the parts in italics put you on the wrong track: going after The Guru in The Garden is, most definitely, not child's play of the kindergarten kind. Are you ready then, Impatient Pupil, for some Preparatory Play?

'Just where does Chomsky's linguistics fit into the bigger domain of the scientific study of human language?' This is one of the first worries of the newcomer or outsider. The present section provides a clear answer to this question by locating Chomsky's linguistics with reference to four other, related but distinct, linguistic concerns: generative grammar, Chomskyan linguistics, radical Chomsky-like linguistics and transformational grammar. The necessary boundaries will be drawn with the aid of five fundamental conceptual distinctions.

1.1 The first and most general distinction that has to be drawn in locating Chomsky's linguistics is that of **generative grammar** vs **non-generative grammar**. Chomsky's linguistics represents a form of generative grammar. Any approach to the

study of human language is a form of generative grammar if it adopts the following requirement: a grammar, as a description of a particular human language, has to be perfectly explicit. Thus Chomsky (1965: 4) characterizes a generative grammar as follows:

If the grammar is, furthermore, perfectly explicit – in other words, if it does not rely on the intelligence of the understanding reader but rather provides an explicit analysis of his contribution – we may (somewhat redundantly) call it a *generative grammar*.¹

For a grammar to meet the requirement of explicitness, Chomsky initially proposed, it should take on the form of a system of formalized rules and other related devices which mechanically enumerate all and only the grammatical sentences of the language, assigning to each of these sentences an appropriate structural description.² Approaches to the study of language which do not subscribe to the requirement of explicitness are by definition nongenerative.

The explicitness of a generative grammar is meant to enhance its precision: the more explicit a grammar or description of a language, the easier it will be to check it for false claims, internal inconsistencies, gaps or lacunae, unjustified hidden assumptions, etc. Recently, Chomsky (1981b: 336) has reaffirmed his belief in formalization as a diagnostic and heuristic tool: 'formalization will not merely be a pointless technical exercise but may bring to light errors or gaps and hidden assumptions, and may yield new theoretical insights and suggest new empirical problems for investigation.'

Generative grammar, thus, differs from nongenerative grammar not in regard to WHAT is claimed about natural language(s), but rather in regard to HOW the claims are expressed. That is, the difference between a generative and nongenerative grammar is not one of linguistic content; the difference is one of metascientific format. This means that it is possible for two approaches to the study of language to differ greatly in regard to what they claim about language (structure etc.), but for both to be generative in virtue of the fact that they both adopt the criterion of explicitness for individual grammars.³

In their frantic fervour to fling themselves at The Master, Prospective Players have from time immemorial floundered at the 'generative vs nongenerative' fork. In the beginning, when The Garden was still no more than a primaeval forest, a fundamental folly was to conflate, carelessly, 'generate' with 'produce' and to take a grammar to be a model of the speaker.⁴ This mindless mistake, The Generative Gaffe, is being monotonously made to this very day. For a recent repetition, Dear Pupil, you may take a look at Schank's (1980: 36) criticisms of The Master's account of how wh-questions are formed, considering while you're at it also The Master's (1980b: 53) repartee. Meanwhile, however, the second conceptual fork on the way to The Garden is waiting to be negotiated.

1.2 The second conceptual distinction that is fundamental to properly locating Chomsky's linguistics is **Chomskyan generative grammar vs non-Chomskyan generative grammar**. That is, within generative grammar a distinction has to be drawn between, on the one hand, the Chomskyan approach and, on the other hand, various non-Chomskyan approaches. This distinction reflects the fact that there may be, and are, differing conceptions of the primary aim, the guiding questions, and the fundamental problem in the study of language. The primary aim of the Chomskyan approach is mentalistic: to increase our understanding of the nature and properties of the human mind. Chomsky (1972: 103) puts the point as follows:

There are any number of questions that might lead one to undertake a study of language. Personally, I am primarily intrigued by the possibility of learning something, from the study of language, that will bring to light inherent properties of the human mind.

In their pursuit of this primary aim, Chomsky (1986: 31) and others are guided by questions about knowledge of language: its nature, origin and use. Among such questions the following are considered 'basic' by Chomsky (1986: 3):

- (1) (a) What constitutes knowledge of language?
- (b) How is knowledge of language acquired?
- (c) How is knowledge of language put to use?