**NOAM CHOMSKY WALKS INTO A BAR:  THE FULL CHOMSKY**
*Chilling with the Father Of Linguistics / Grandpa of 21st Century American Progressive Thought*

{The bar of the Campus Inn, Ann Arbor, MI. July 12, 2013.  10am.}
{begin tape}
{I'm explaining what the AnnArborChronicle.com is, after disparaging AnnArbor.com as "not a paper"}

**David Erik Nelson:** . . . mostly dedicated to really extensive reporting on local public meetings and political events, school board. Which . . . which is increasingly of no interest to online publications, we've discovered.

      **Noam Chomsky:** OK.  Let's go ahead.

**DEN:** Excellent.  So, I understand that you're in town, actually, for two different talks.

      **N.C.:** Yes, three, actually.  It was a seminar yesterday and a talk, and another one today.

DEN: And yesterday was with linguistics, and today is with . . .

      **N.C.:** Grad stu--

DEN: . . . LEO/GEO.

      **N.C.:** Yeah.

DEN: How did yesterday go?  [NC indicates he didn't catch the question, which I repeat louder]  How did yesterday go?

      **N.C.:** Fine, as always.  [chuckles]  It's a very good department here, and there's a national meeting of the linguistics society, so lots of people--

DEN: OK. Did you primarily--

      **N.C.:** --plenty of old students.

DEN: Of yours?

      **N.C.:** Yeah.  [chuckles] It was nice.

DEN: That must be really wonderful.

      **N.C.:** [laughs] In fact, a lot of them are retiring already.  Which is strange.

DEN: Plausibly terrifying.

      **N.C.:** Yeah. [laughs]

DEN: Did you primarily come for the linguistics piece, or to speak to the union?

      **N.C.:** I was first invited by the linguists.  That goes way back.  I have pretty close connections with the linguistics department here.

DEN: Um, so, the substance of that talk . . . I was looking at the abstract online, where you mention this traditional view that the purpose of language is to construct thoughts, and the more contemporary view that its principal use is communication, um . . . I was hoping that you could elucidate that a little further.

      **N.C.:** By now it's a kind of a dogma that the function of language is primarily communication.  There's no support for it, and

there's actually pretty strong evidence against it, and I ran through some of the evidence yesterday. The most important evidence is actually just when you take a look at the actual nature of language, and I think what you find is that--well, I mean, you have to really look closely, but--you have to find that there are conflicts between what's called "computational efficiency"--getting the best possible system, which is the way a language *would* develop, in the mind, it seeks the best possible system--there are conflicts between that and "communicative efficiency," what's good for communication.  And, when you investigate those conflicts, you find that invariably, as far as is known, computational efficiency wins out and communication is simply ignored.  The most striking, and the one that I did talk about a little, had to do with just the linear order of words.  That's essential for communication, of course, but it doesn't seem to even be *part* of the structure of the language.  It seems to be something tacked on on the outside just to meet the conditions of the sensory-motor system.  But it's not part of the language fundamentally.

DEN: So you're saying that the *fact* that it's linear, that we speak in a stream of words--

     **N.C.:** It's because we can't speak in parallel.  That's the nature of our sensory-motor system.  If we had two channels, and could speak in parallel--which, incidentally, dolphins do--we could have a more complex system.  But whatever's going on in the brain has to be--if it does come out--has to come out through the sensory-motor system, through touch or sight or, usually, sound.  And, incidentally, very little of it comes out. If you just introspect for a minute, you'll discover that you can't go thirty seconds without talking to yourself.  It's almost impossible.  And 99% of your use of language never even is externalized.

DEN: Um [very awkwardly long pause]  That's really wonderful and stunning.

     **N.C.:** Well, just think about it.  It takes a real act of will just to keep from talking to yourself.

DEN: Um . . . so, when you're talking about . . . what's the edge of language for you?  'cause, we do things that are communicative that you probably *aren't* grouping into "language."  Like, we've made choices in the garments that we've worn, in part to communicate certain things about ourselves.

     **N.C.:** Almost everything we do is some form of communication.

DEN: But when you're talking about language you're taking a subset--

     **N.C.:** Language is also *used* for communication, and for many other things. Like, for whatever reason, humans find it difficult and hard to be in the same place with somebody and not to talk to them.  If you're standing at a bus stop for half an hour the chances are you'll talk to the person next to you--

DEN: I have a seven year old son, so I understand.          **[TK 05:27]**

     **N.C.:** It's just really hard. If you're stuck in a room with somebody--it's a way torturing people.  Put two people in a room, close the door, and ask them not to talk to each other.  It just doesn't work.  You have to do it.  And that kind of interaction is not serious communication.  So, if your'e talking to someone at a bus stop, you talk about what happened to the football team yesterday or something.  You don't care, they don't care, you're not trying to transmit any information, it's what anthropologists sometimes call "phatic communication," just setting up relations among people, and most interchange with language is actually that, telling jokes at a party, not *communicating* anything.  This is just a way of creating and solidifying social relations.  If communication *means* anything--we can deprive it of meaning of we like--but if it *means* something, then it has something to do with transmitting beliefs, information, something like that, and that's a very marginal aspect of language--or wearing clothes.  And you're communicating in other ways.  But even that is--plus, the fact that very little of language is even externalized.

    All of that isn't really as significant as what's more difficult to think about, but much more important: What's the fundamental design of language.  If you want to understand what the function of the visual system is, you can't just say "I use it to watch television."  That's not biology.  You want to understand the visual system, you have to look into its nature.  See what it does.  Investigate it.  It's a  scientific problem.  And then you find things about the visual system that are surprising.  It's the same with language.  Its' not enough to say "Yeah, I use it to talk to my friends."  If you want to understand something about it, you have to look into its nature. And you can't do that in a casual conversation.  THat requires investigation, like any other hard topic.  And when you investigate it, you find things like I just mentioned, that linear order just isn't part of the way language is used.  You can see it in simple cases.  Take the example I used last night, take this sentence:
    "Eagles that fly swim."
Ok.  And put an adverb in front of it:

"Instinctively, eagles that fly swim."

"Instinctively" goes with a verb. Which verb? With "swim"? With "fly"? So, it's "instinctively they swim" not "instinctively they fly." Well, "fly" is the word that's *closest* to "instinctively," but you never use linear order, you never use closeness, to determine how things are understood. Or suppose you put "can" in front of it:

"Can eagles that fly swim?"

You're asking a question about swimming, not flying, even though "swim" is farther away. And in fact there *is* a minimal-distance relation between "instinctively" or "can" and "swim," but it's a structural relation, and that requires looking into the nature of structure. Then you find that, yes, it's a minimal distance, but a minimal *structural* distance, not a minimal linear distance. Now, calculating linear distances is *far* simpler than calculating structural distances. If you look at the computational properties, calculating order is trivial. Calculating *structure* is quite difficult. Nevertheless, you just automatically, reflexively calculate structure. A child, for example, never makes a mistake about this. Children have no evidence, they have zero evidence about what the adverb goes with, but every infant understands it, and it's because the nature--and this is not just this example, but every example, every construction in every language works the same way: It uses computationally complex notions like structural distance, but not computationally simple notions like linear distance, and there's only one possible explanation for that: Linear order just isn't available for the computational system. It's just not available, period. Therefore you can't use it, and you use the simplest thing there is, which is structural distance.

But that just tells you that linear order comes from somewhere else. Not from the language. And it's obvious where it comes from: You can't speak structurally, you can't produce *structures*, you can only produce linear orders of words. So, you're forced, whatever's going on in the mind, has to work its way through this system on the outside, the sensory-motor system. If you look at the evolution of--we know very little about the evolution of these things, but something--the sensory-motor system was around for millennia, centuries before the language ever emerged. It was just sitting there. For example chimpanzees have approximately the same auditory system we have, without any problem detecting the sounds we detect, but it's just noise to them, they can't do it, they're not designed to do it. So it takes a newborn infant--with all kind of noise going on in the environment, a mass of stimuli, what William James called "blooming, buzzing confusion," that's what the child is born into--but an infant reflexively extracts from that environment certain things that are language related. An ape just hears noise. Similarly, humans can't detect what other animals pick out of the environment, were not built for it. They're not built for language. We're built for language. An infant picks it out reflexively, and *virtually* reflexively goes through the stages of development that lead to what you and I are now doing with very little teaching. It's called "learning," but that doesn't really mean anything; it's just a system that grows, like other biological systems, it's internally designed. When you study its nature--which takes some work--you discover that, for example, things like linear order just aren't part of it. That's a deep, fundamental property of language, and it indicates that any form of externalization, getting it into the outside world, is tacked on, its secondary, and therefore any use of that is even more remote from the nature of language, like communication, for example.                    **[TK 13:00]**

DEN: Lemme step back: Why is it that we know, or that we're lead to believe, that externalization is an afterthought, rather than fundamental?

**N.C.:** Because externalization requires linear order, and linear order is *not* part of the computational system, and therefore it's tacked on afterwards. And the only obvious reason is because whatever's going on in our minds has to work its way through the sensory-motor system to get outside.

DEN: So there's--

**N.C.:** And the sensory-motor system imposes constrains that have nothing to do with language.

DEN: I have . . . bifurcating questions now, predictably.

**N.C.:** Pardon?

DEN: [I make a crazy "forking paths" gesture] I have bifurcating questions. Um . . . I guess, one, just about linguistics, is that . . . I get the sense that you kind of feel like linguistics has gone off in the weeds. There's too much interest in communication and not enough into the fundamental process that's generating language.

**N.C.:** Actually, there isn't very much interest in communication. This is a *dogma*, but nobody really investigates it. Nobody *studied* much about commutation. And there's a good reason for that. Communication, if you're really interested in communication, you're studying a process of *extreme* complexity. When you and I do try to communicate--like what we're doing

now--we're bringing in all kinds of background assumptions about each other, which we're not aware of, but they're critical to the interchange that's going on. They come from all over the place. I mean, the way we look, my guesses about your background, your guess about my background, an enormous, complex background of implicit understanding--*partial* understanding--and assumptions is involved in the simplest act of communication, and that's just too hard to study. Scientists can't study complicated things, they can inly study simple things. So nobody studies it.

DEN: Are you saying they're not up to the challenge, or it simply cannot be broken down--

**N.C.:** It's just too hard. I don't know if you have any background in the sciences, but it's hard. Say a molecule becomes too complicated physicists can't study it any more, they have to hand it over to chemists, who look at more complicated things. If an organic molecule or organic system becomes too complicated the chemists can't handle it, they give it to the biologists and they try to do something with it. If it's too complicated for the biologists, like what we're now talking about, they hand it over to social scientists, and they try to do something with it. The more you get into more and more complexity, the less and less you're able to discover for obvious reasons: It's hard to study complicated things. It's hard enough to study simple things seriously. For example, physicists can't really solve what's called the "three body" problem--how do three bodies interact? It's too hard.

DEN: So, then, your inclination is to believe that looking at the generative mechanism of language probably would mean that there's a simplification going on there, that there's a few core principals or functions.

**N.C.:** There's something obvious about language. Every language--yours, mine, everyone's--provides an unbounded array of potential expressions that could be thought and could be used, and its unbounded, it's infinite and you can keep adding new ones without bounds, kinda like the numbers: there's always a bigger one. That's gotta be a finite system because you've got a finite brain. So, there's a finite system that's yielding--"generating" is the technical term--an infinite array of potential expressions, each of them is a structured object which has some kind of meaning, a semantic interpretation connected to thought, and sometimes it's externalized into the outside world--rarely, but sometimes. That's the core property of language. Now, it wasn't really possible to study that property seriously until about 60 years ago. And the reason was that the fundamental concept of the finite system yielding an infinite array of structures was not very well understood. That's why you can go back to, say, Darwin, he says the fundamental difference between humans and all other animals is language, and language provides, he says, an "almost infinite number of expressions."

Well, the phrase "almost infinite" doesn't mean anything. That's like saying there's an "almost infinite" number of integers. It's not "almost infinite"; it's infinite. You can't be "almost infinite," but the concept wasn't understood, so the standard traditional term used by a lot of people was "almost infinite." Doesn't mean anything. What it means is infinite, but the brain is finite, so you have the problem of understanding how a finite object--like, say, your laptop computer or your brain, which is a finite object--can, given enough time and memory, go on indefinitely. You can write a program for your laptop which will add any numbers no matter how big they are. Of course, for the laptop to do that you might have to stick in extra disks, because it doesn't have enough memory, but it has the program, the system, which can do it. And that range of concepts was not really fully understood until roughly the 1930s. By then the fundamental nature of of computational systems was clarified and discovered, and it became possible to pursue these questions in a much more serious way than before. There were stabs at them in the past, but it could only be stabs. But the basic understanding of such systems made it possible to look at the core property of language, the basic property, the one that I just mentioned. But when you do it, it's not easy. It's like other problems in the sciences: It sounds easy, but it isn't.

As I mentioned yesterday, what started to happen roughly in the 1950s is a little bit like what happened in the basic sciences in the early 17th century. You go back to the history of science, and for millennia the greatest scientists thought they had answers--Aristotle, Galileo thought they had answers to very simple questions. Like, suppose I have a cup in my hand, and it has boiling water in it, and I have my hand over the cup. If I let go with my hands the cup will fall and the steam will rise. Why? Well, there was an answer: They're each finding their natural place. The natural place of steam us up there, the natural place of the cup is down there. OK. End of problem. If I have two cups, or two objects, a big heavy one and a little light one, which will fall faster? Well, obviously, the heavy one. And that was--how do I--if I look at that rectangle over there [points at my iPhone, which was at that very moment totally failing to make a backup recording of this conversation], how do I see it? Well, it's form flits through the air and imprints itself on my brain. That solves that problem. And there were answers like that to problems, except none of them made any sense. And when, around the time of Galileo, the early 17th Century, when scientists began to allow themselves to be puzzled about these things, and not to be satisfied with what are really meaningless answers, then you get the beginning of science. It turns out all your intuitions are wrong, all your guess are wrong, all your beliefs are senseless, and you enter it the rational spirit which became the Enlightenment and became the modern era. It's not that there was nothing there before, of course there was a lot there before. But there was a big change then. And that's the same kind of change that, in my opinion--and this is a minority opinion--ought to take place in the human sciences. And can, in some areas. The study of language is one of them. The study of vision is another. In fact, if you go back 60 years it was quite commonly assumed among biologists that the variety of organisms--the same phrase was used, "almost infinite."

Well, you're either infinite or fixed; there is no "almost infinite." But that was a common belif; I'm actually paraphrasing a famous biologist. And it turns out to be completely wrong. The range of organisms is very narrow, so narrow that there are even proposals--which may be wrong, but are taken seriously--that there's what's called a "universal genome," a basic genome for metazoa--you know, complex organisms--that's essentially fixed and emerged at around the Cambrian Explosion, and ever since then we just get slight variations on it**,** like microbacterium and humans **,** slight variations on the basic pattern which was fixed. And that may not be right, but it doesn't seem crazy, and it's not kind of an "infinite" variety. And the same is true of language and other system, and now something is beginning to be understood about it.

But, to a large extent it hasn't penetrated into the human sciences, and this ability just to be puzzled, just that, Galileo's ability, that's a hard barrier to overcome. The case that you brought up at first, about communication and linear order, the case in point, people ought to be puzzled by the fact that in the simple sentences I mention you interpret them one way and not another way, automatically, you don't have any

choice, it's just the way your mind works.  If you're puzzled, then the question is "Why?" and there's an immediate answer: The computational system just doesn't pay attention to the externalization, hence the communication is something that's tacked on to the outside.
    **[TK 25:15]**

DEN: I notice that, um, you keep using words like "built" and "designed" and "tacked on," and I'm wondering if that's a metaphorical habit--

    **N.C.:** It's metaphor.  It's just a term, it's like saying "That's the way it turned out, by the laws of nature."  Nobody's designing it.

DEN: So, then, your inclination would be to believe that language developed among our specific species because it did, and once it started popping out of our mouths and hands we had use for it?

    **N.C.:** There was actually use for it before it popped out: You could think.  We don't have any tape recordings from 100 thousand years ago, but you try to reconstruct what must have happened, what very likely happened.  Proto-humans are hunter-gatherers.  In fact, humans were hunter-gatherers until very recently, that's practically the whole history of *homo sapiens.*  And there were small groups, maybe 50 to 100 people.  Evidently, in one of these groups, some very small, probably very small, wiring of the brain took place, by some small genetic change-- not enough is understood about genetics to imagine what it could be--but things like that do happen.  We have evidence for them.  And so some small genetic change took place, and it *yielded* the capacity to produce, and to meet the basic property of language, to produce this infinite array of expressions that latched on to thought systems that were kind of inchoate, limited, restricted, maybe shared with other animals.  And at that point you have the ability to plan, and to interpret, and to think, and that gives you advantages.  You can't communicate, because nobody else has it, this happens in a person.  You don't have mutations in a group, they're in individuals.  It could be--it would probably die out.  Most advantageous mutations do die out; it's hard for them to latch on.  There's statistical evidence for that now.  But this one apparently latched on, and it transmitted to offspring partially.  After a while, it could take over a small group.  At that point there becomes a reason to externalize it.  Externalizing it is a hard problem, you have to connect this thing that's inside your mind, which developed without any selectional pressures at all, just by laws of nature, and you have to connect that to a sensory-motor system that had been around for hundreds of thousands of years, and they don't match.  They're different systems.  So, that's a hard problem, and that's the problem of externalization.  When you learn a second language.  Suppose you learn French.  French is going to have the same property--the linear order that I mention--but you don't learn that, nobody teaches that too you.  You know it, because that's part of being human, to know that.  What you have to learn is what amount to trivialities: how it's pronounced, what's the order of the words, what kind of affixes does it have.  You know, you memorize inflections [shrugs].  What you learn when you learn a second language are a selection of trivialities that are around the periphery of the language. But the core part of the language you don't learn because you know it.  That's just the nature of humans.  And the same with a child acquiring the language.  And that's the externalization problem, and it's a hard problem, so it can be done in many different ways, and we get the kind of illusion that there are many different languages, but fundamentally they're all the same.  And that's how we can learn any of them, a child can learn any of them because basically the core computational processes are probably identical, or very similar, with variations in almost entirely the externalization system.

DEN:  You had mentioned the anguish people feel if they're in proximity and denied the ability to communicate, or obviously if they're isolated and unable to communicate---

    **N.C.:** To *interact*, which is quite different from communication.

DEN: --to interact with another, or with their sense of another, person or entity.

    **N.C.:** To just have some relation to that other person there.

DEN: Would you--I'm asking you to guess, I suppose--that it came with that original creation of language device, or that it only arose after people started

    [Chomsky and I talk over each other here for a bit, and the only discernible word on the recording is Chomsky saying "animals"]

    **N.C.:** There are a lot of things like that.  For example, it's very, you can't look into somebody else's eyes for more than a fleeting second.  If you do, it's either hostile or very intimate.  It can't just be ordinary.  Like, you and I can't look into each other's eyes for more than a second, it would be very hostile,  or else it would be that we were in *love* or something like that.  There's nothing in between.  That's just part of being human.  Other animals find it very hostile.  Sometimes you just *can't* stare at an animal, it'll get angry, you know?  Why?  And it's got nothing to do with language.  It's something deep int he history of organisms.  Nobody knows why.

DEN:  So that's just an aspect, like the sensory-motor system has become very tightly linked to this, but it's sort of a separate--

    **N.C.:** It's got its own characteristics, which were there long before language.  As I said, the auditory system is probably common to primates, very close to it.  There's even evidence that chimpanzees pick out the same sounds that humans pick out.  We

don't use all the possible sounds for language, only some of them, and it seems that apes are pretty much tuned to the same sounds. Of course, they can't do anything with them, to them it's just noise.

DEN: So, are there questions being asked and investigated in linguists right now that you find very interesting, or is it--

**N.C.:** Oh yeah, all of these, for example. And this is just the beginning. You can go on and find many other things. In fact, almost everything you look at is puzzling. It was just like physics in the 17th century. Once physicists allowed themselves to be puzzled, everything became a puzzle, because you understand nothing, you know? In fact Galileo, at the end of his life, kind of commiserated that--I forget exactly how he put it, but he said, I think, "We can understand nothing about the world, nothing." And what he meant is we can't get an explanation for it in terms that are intelligible to us.
     **[TK 32:44]**

DEN: So we're blinded by all the things we think we know?

**N.C.:** We know it in some sense, like I *know* that if I let the cup go it will fall, nobody is telling me that, I know it. But *why* does it fall? That turns out to be not so trivial. If you look at how fast does it fall? Do two things of different weights fall at different speeds? That's the bare beginning already. By that point your intuitions are all wrong, and then you go on to more complicated things, and they're even more wrong, you know? And that's rational inquiry, that's science.

DEN: [moderately awkward pause] Man, I don't know which question to go with next! Um. Are there things that you would like to talk about in these situations but never get a chance to because you're asked a limited set of questions?

**N.C.:** Well, you know, the really interesting questions, if we went on would require a blackboard and all that. I mean, that's why people go to graduate school. You can't just talk about it. I mean, you can talk about simple cases, but as soon as you look into it it becomes hard [looks at watch] I'm gonna have to go pretty soon.

DEN: OK. Um. Then, I guess, I have some writing questions. You seem to average about two books a year over the course of the last 50-odd years--

**N.C.:** Well, that's misleading. A lot of the books are collections of interviews or talks.

DEN: Well you seem to write a fair bit, and I'd read that you used to use sort of a very idiosyncratic word processor your son had created. Do you still use that.

**N.C.:** [very fond smile] I *would* use it, except that Microsoft, in its wisdom, has weakened the basic core program, DOS, and by now DOS doesn't support it any longer. For years--my son was a high school student in the early '80s, and he just wrote it in machine language. There were no word processors then. For computer scientists, that's great, you can fiddle with it, you can do things with it. The contemporary word processing systems, the good computer scientists don't like because what goes on is kind of hidden inside them, and you can't manipulate it. As the systems became more user-friendly, the producers like Microsoft, weakened the support system, and it can no longer handle the kind of system my son wrote. So I can't use it.
     **[TK 35:31]**

DEN: So what are you using now?

**N.C.:** Just some commercial thing--

DEN: Whatever is there?

**N.C.:** [chuckles] Whatever it comes with.

DEN: Do you have a daily habit of writing?

**N.C.:** Just whenever I get a little time. [chuckles]

DEN: Because you're also obviously extensively well-read and remarkably well informed, I think a goodly portion of Ann Arbor

probably looks to you to inform them about what's going on politically--

**N.C.:** It looks different to me. All i can think of is that huge stack of books I really have to read but will never get to.

DEN: Well, then, you're stuck like Galileo then, aren't you?

**N.C.:** Maybe. Yeah. That's what we all are, puzzled by everything, you know?

DEN: When you read the things that your critics have written about you, politically, do you recognize yourself in how they characterize you?          **[TK 36:21]**

**N.C.:** Virtually never.

DEN: I was wondering--I read some pieces David Horowitz wrote around September 11 that make you sound much more terrifying than you are.

**N.C.:** What you should do when you read these things is just check back to the original sources, and see what's there. Ask how it compares to what's being said. You'll notice that there rarely are references, and there's a reason for that.

DEN: One of the accusations I see leveled against you frequently is one of "moral equivalency."

**N.C.:** Moral equivalence is a very interesting concept. Do you know where it comes from?

DEN: Please go on.

**N.C.:** I mean, the term is kind of old, but it came into common usage with Jean Kirkpatrick--take a look at the history, do a Google search, and you'll find that until Jean Kirkpatrick it was almost never used. With Jean Kirkpatrick it got started. What did she use it for? She was in the Reagan Administration. She used it to try to prevent criticism of the United States. So if anybody made any kind of critical comment about US policy, they were accused of "moral equivalence," inevitably equating the United States with Nazi Germany, or something. It's just a crude, vulgar propaganda technique to prevent criticism of the Holy State and no one else--that's the only way the term is ever used, like the way you used it. The accusation of "moral equivalence" means you're being critical of the Holy State. You're not allowed to be critical of the Holy State. So that's moral equivalence, whatever that's supposed to mean. But it's just a term, a vulgar term of propaganda, and that's where it comes form.

DEN: In that sense you're using "vulgar" as in "gauche" or "vulgar" as in "common"?

**N.C.:** It's a cheap--

DEN: Cheap shot?

**N.C.:** A cheap, cowardly way of protecting divinity from criticism. The divinity, in this case, is State Power.

DEN: By the same note, though, people do seem frequently upset by what you write, despite the fact that what your write might be strongly worded, but is not especially strident. I'm wondering how that strikes you.

**N.C.:** If you were in the Soviet Union 50 years ago, people were *very* upset by what dissidents said. If you're in Iran today, what critics of the government say is very, really angers the religious population. I'd say the rural population support the clerics. People tend to have doctrines that they want to hold on to. And it's not--it's unpleasant. I mean, we have some share of responsibility for what the government does, and it's not easy to look into the mirror, in your personal life or anything else. There's no human being who hasn't done things that are wrong, but they very rarely want to see it. What they usually do is construct some justification for it, not to try to look into the mirror and see what's true. That's too simple.

DEN: Do you ever see this as a consequence of the language mechanism itself.

**N.C.:** Not really, it's much deeper than that.

DEN:  Deeper than language?

     **N.C.:** It's kind of separate from language.  It's just the way--I mean, take a five-year-old kid who has a three-year-old brother.  And he took a toy from his brother when his mother wasn't looking.  And the little kid starts screaming and the mother comes in and asks the older kid what happened, and he says "Oh, he didn't want it, and it wasn't his anyway, and I just happened to have it"--you know, he doesn't say, "I took it from him because I'm bigger and stronger than he is," even though that was the reason.  It's  just normal human behavior.  It's not particular admirable, but it's normal human behavior.  And it goes on to the vulgarity of Jean Kirkpatrick. You can't criticize the Holy State, so we'll just try and shut people up somehow.

DEN:  Just based on what you said today I wonder about that discomfort people feel when they're told an unpleasant truth.

     **N.C.:** About themselves.

DEN: About themselves or--

     **N.C.:** About anything they're associated with.

DEN: Exactly!

     **N.C.:** Like your football team or your country or whatever it may be, so you're defensive.

DEN: And it just seems to me that there's perhaps an argument to be made that if the primary thing that I'm using language for is to clarify and make coherent my thoughts, when I hear someone saying back to me--it's like they're shoehorning into my head a set of unpleasant thoughts.

     **N.C.:** That's what dissidence is.  Take a look at the history, take a look at intellectual history.  In every society there are articulate people, more privilege or whatever the reason may be.  And if you look at them they're almost *all* supportive of power, overwhelmingly supportive of power.  But there's almost always a fringe of dissidents, a fringe of people who say "That's wrong," you know, and they're almost always persecuted.  And that goes back as far as you like.  Go back to, say, the biblical stories.  Just stories, but that's the earliest kind of semi-recorded history.  There were people who we would call dissidents: They were critical of the kings, they gave geo-political analysis--"you're getting us into trouble"--calling for mercy for widows and orphans, and condemning the powerful for not doing it.  Centuries later they were honored, called "prophets."  They weren't honored at the time.  Take a look at what happened to the time: They were imprisoned, vilified, and driven into the dessert, and denounced as "haters of Israel"-- literally, that's a quote--and treated very badly.  There were people who were treated well.  Centuries later they were called "false prophets," the were the flatterers of the court.  That's the pattern that runs right through history, right to the present.  The people who you were quoting, they're the flatterers of the court.  People who criticize, they're the ones who are picking up the mantle of dissent.             **[TK 43:29]**

DEN: You have the advantage of a long view now; do you think humans are rational?

     **N.C.:** They have a rational component, they have an irrational component, like all of us.

DEN: Do they exercise the rational component more than chance would dictate?

     **N.C.:** Not as much as I think they should. [chuckles]  Bt the same is true even in what are called the sciences, like, say, the things we started talking about.  Seems to me that if we were rational, the kinds of things that you and I were talking about would be now truisms we teach elementary school, but they're very much contested, in fact denied.  If you took a poll of the people who were there last night, most of them would object.  I suspect.

DEN: Would object to, like, thinking, downplaying, thinking of communication as an almost accidental result, not as a cause?

     **N.C.:** I think they would either find it a very surprising idea, or probably just reject it flat out.  Except people who had studied these things.

DEN: Frankly it doesn't seem that controversial.

**N.C.:** I don't think it is either.

DEN: We're only born one at a time.
Just a quick personal question:  Was it frightening to be detained and questioned in Israel.

**N.C.:** [shrugs]

DEN: Simply inconvenient?

**N.C.:** Boring.

DEN: OK.  It sounds terrifying to me, but . . . I don't like going through airport security.

**N.C.:** [laughs] Well, I don't either, but it's mainly boring.

DEN: You probably have to wrap up soonish, don't you?

**N.C.:** Yeah, I do, I really have someone coming for me.

D.E.N.: I was introduced to your work when I was a college student, in a linguistics class.  And it ended up inspiring me to write a series of computer programs that wrote poetry, and then other ones that wrote self-important academic criticism of that poetry, which is just, I just needed to get that out of the way, the kinda fan-boy squealing.  So, if I could just ask one final question:  Do colorless green ideas sleep furiously?

**N.C.:** [smiles] Well that sentence was seriously misinterpreted for a lack of a rational faculty.  As soon as the sentence came out there were all kind of people who tried to show how you could use it, you could write a poem about it, you can take any sequence of words and do something with it.  The point of the example, if you look at the context, it was picked in order to refute every theory there was about what makes sentences grammatical.  There's a set of ideas that were around, and that particular--it was one of a series of examples, I happened to show they were all false--but that doesn't mean that it's not meaningful.  Of course it's meaningful, so is anything.  If you read the same words backwards, it's also meaningful, but it has a different status.  If you say "Furiously sleep ideas green colorless," you can write a poem about that, too.  But that sequence of words has a different status in your mind than "Colorless green ideas sleep furiously."

D.E.N.:  You know, it's really funny that it wasn't controversial in the field, because I also used to be a high school teacher, and I would always trot this out to my classes, as an English teacher, and what was remarkable to me was that people always reacted to it the same way that we had when we were students, which is that you're immediately persuade because it feels like it should make, but there's no way to meaningfully decoded it--

**N.C.:** On the other hand, if you read it backwards--

DEN: Exactly!

**N.C.:** --it's quite different.  Even though, if you think about it, you can impose a meaning on it.

DEN: And so it seemed kind of, you know, QED right from the start.

**N.C.:** It should be trivial.

D.E.N.: It seems to me that it's one of those cases of what people are reacting to is the bad feeling of a thought clanging in their head with the other thoughts, more than a rational . . . [trails off]

**N.C.:** That's true.  And that's true of the professional discipline as well, if you look at the history.  Sort of the nature of the sentence isn't understood.  [chuckles]  It's not that complicated.

I've gotta go.

DEN: Do you mind if I take a picture of us?

N.C.: Sure.  I'll put my glasses back on so people will know it's me.

DEN: You actually look remarkably like yourself.  [Chomsky laughs.]

{I futz with phone, we chit-chat while I do so, I thank Chomsky about a billion times}
{end tape}