

The Convergence between Chomsky and Ibn Khaldun in the Universality of Language

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I. Introduction

What is language? what we know when we know a language? and how does a child come to learn all the structures of his language in manners of uniformity and rapidity? Such questions have been frequently asked for many centuries and there have appeared many attempts to provide satisfying and logical explanations for them. The nature of language concerned many linguists and became a very controversial subject until our very recent day. This argumentative issue causes contrastive schools of language ranging from the behaviorists, led by Skinner, to the generativists, led by Chomsky.

Noam Chomsky is perhaps the well-known and the most prominent linguist of the second half of the Twentieth Century. He was born in December 7, 1928 to a Jewish father in East Oak Lane, near Philadelphia. When Chomsky graduated from Central High School of Philadelphia, he began studying philosophy and linguistics at the University of Pennsylvania. Chomsky is also known as an intellectual in the anarchist socialist movement ("Wikipedia," 2010). He has also political writings and has his presence in media.

The most dominant theory in syntax is Chomsky's Generative Grammar, introduced in his influential book *Syntactic Structures* (1957). This theory, which started since 1950 unit today, assumes that language is an innate ability of all humans regardless of their different languages. He asserts that people have a biologically determined language faculty which he called, *Universal Grammar*. This theory is speculated in different names like Competence vs. Performance, Innateness and Transformational Grammar. Chomsky, to make this theory explanatory adequate, explained two approaches that account for the universal grammar, which are the *Principals and Parameters* approach and *Minimalism*.

However, it can be argued that the innateness hypothesis is not firstly originated by Chomsky. There is a great ignorance of **Ibn Khaldun's** contributions in the same field. Abdu-Arrahman Ibn Khaldun is a social and political scholar as well as a philosopher and linguist. He was born in 1332 and died in 1406, and lived during time when Muslims established the greatest Islamic empire and the Western were living in dark ages. Ibn Khaldun lived in an educated rich family. He was talented to the extent that while he was studying, he was given a political position (SErAjAddEEen, EsmAyyil, 2008).

In his greatest work, *Muqaddimah of Ibn Khaldun*, published in 1377, he provides psycholinguistic views of the nature of language. He accounted for the competence and performance of language. Further, Ibn Khadun provided an understanding of human behavior, the connection between language, knowledge and perception. If one closely read that book, he will find that Ibn Khadun provided explanations for the imperfection of speakers' second language as compared with their first language.

Although it seems in the first place that Chomsky is the first to account for the universality of language, however, he is chronologically not the first. Ibn Khadun exceeded him in priority providing similar ideas about the nature of language. The fact is that Ibn Khadun's hypotheses were not theorized and light was not shed on them. The present paper aims at proving the priority of Ibn Khaldun's observations about the nature of human language over Chomsky's and some points of convergence between the two are examined.

II. Ibn Khaldun and Chomsky in the innateness of language

Chomsky's theory, known as the Generative Grammar theory, provided the best so far explanation of the nature of language. He suggests that language is an innate ability- that is to say; we are born with a set of rules about language in our heads, which he refers to as the Universal Grammar (UG) or Language Acquisition Device (LAD). Chomsky insists that we should approach language as a cognitive system within human mind. This language faculty that all humans have consists of a set of principals, properties that all languages share.

A child born with these principals in mind needs a linguistic experience (input) to enable him acquire his native language and to be able to produce the grammar of his native language (output). Andrew Radford (1997) writes "Chomsky maintains that language acquisition is an activity unique to human beings, and different in kind from any other type of learning which human beings experience, so that learning a language involves mental processes entirely distinct from those involved in e.g. learning to play chess or learning to ride a bicycle." (p.9)

Ibn Khaldun (1377), seven centuries ago, introduced what is known in Arabic as *al-malakah al-lisaniah*. Ibn Khaldun views malakah (habit) as attribute firmly established in the human psych which provides a man with competence to carry out related action. (p.297). He actually defines language as a technical habit of the tongue. Therefore, some people might think that Ibn Khaldun views language as behavior. That is true in a point of fact. He claims that the best way to learn is by memorizing after constant repetition. So, it seems by now that he converges to the behaviorist approach. Miriam Cook (1983) says that language, according to Ibn Khaldun, begins as a habit, that is, it is the repeated correct usage of words and expressions in particular ways which are deemed most effective for communicating ideas (p. 182). However, if we resort to the dictionaries to fully comprehend the meaning of 'habit', we will find that the meaning is relative. Further, the word *malakah* has a set of entries in the dictionary which includes 'trait of character, natural disposition, aptitude, gift, faculty, talent' (Wehr, 1994, p. 1082). Thus, it is evident that language for Ibn Khaldun is natural phenomenon, something that man possesses. He elaborates that all faculties (*malakahs*) are physical, whether possessed on the brain or on the body (Muqaddimah of Ibn Khaldun, 1958, p 771). This actually carries the same idea of Chomsky when he maintains that the most plausible explanation for the nature of language is that it is determined by a biologically endowed faculty within the brain (Andrew Radford, 1997, p. 8). Therefore, Chomsky and Ibn Khaldun share the same assumption of the innateness of language.

Chomsky views this language faculty as a device which consists of universals, particularly, principals; and those principals are shared among all languages. For example, all languages have subjects, verbs, and objects; however, the only difference is that languages vary in the possible structures of the principals. In other words, languages differ in the parameters, the possible variants that a particular language takes. So, the only effort a child has to do is to elicit the structure of his language from his language device on the basis of the language he is exposed to. "A central concern of the study of language, including generative grammar, is to identify the properties specific to the human faculty of language (FL). Within the biolinguistic perspective" (Chomsky, 1995).

On the other hand, Ibn Khaldun maintains the same idea as Chomsky's when he differentiated between language faculty (*al-malkah*) and language creation. That is evident when one reads in *Muqaddimah of Ibn Khaldun* as confirmed "From here we know that the instinct is different from Arabic creation, and it is by no mean the same as the Arabic itself. Creation of Arabic means knowing the rules of Arabic in that instinct" (Muqaddimah of Ibn Khaldun, 1967, p.1081). So, the distinction that Ibn Khaldun mentions about the instinct (language faculty) and Arabic creation (the production of actual language) draws our attention to the distinction Chomsky draws between competence and performance. Chomsky defines competence as the implicit knowledge of the rules of language which enables people to produce and comprehend sentences that they have never heard or produced before. Thus, both Chomsky and Ibn Khaldun referred to language competence but in different words.

Furthermore, Chomsky indicated that the actual production of language is known as the *performance*; which might be an unreliable source of approaching the competence because the actual use of language includes slips of the tongue and doesn't reflect the competence. Similarly, Ibn Khaldun mentions the same thought when he says:

As well as find many of the geniuses of the grammarians and skilled in Arab use, who are acquainted with its laws, if asked to write two lines to his brother, erred on the right usage; made extensive errors in form and meaning, errors which are unacceptable in the perfect Arabic tongue. We find also those who possess the perfect knowledge of Arabic, might not be able to differentiate between subjects and objects or able to differentiate between accusative and genitive in Arabic. (Muqaddimah of Ibn Khaldun, 1967, p.1082)

Furthermore, Ibn Khaldun, studying the speech of Arabs, indicates that people use language depending on the context of the use. He asserts that "Every session has a different discussion". (Muqaddimah of Ibn Khaldun, 1967, p.1084)

Therefore, by saying so, he doesn't only converge with Chomsky's Linguistic Competence, but also with Hymes' communicative competence.

Finally, Ibn Khaldun's perception of language can be summarized through these lines as Ahmad Abdussalam (1995) writes: According to Ibn Khaldun, the reason for this is that Arabic linguistics is merely knowledge of the rules and forms of this habit (language). It is knowledge of a quality; it is not the quality itself. (p. 192)

II. Ibn Khaldun and Chomsky in the acquisition of language

In fact, there have been many studies regarding the process of perception like the information processing approach. This approach indicates that a person is exposed to an activity in the real world, subsequently functions as the input for the learner, which is then translated in his competence into meanings. Actually, this relationship between language and perception in the process of acquisition is mentioned by Ibn Khaldun. He claims that acquisition is a process that starts with perception (*idrak or taswwur*) of reality. Perception is followed by conformation or negation of essential attributes of these realities in the competence, followed finally by the native speaker's ability to give intuitional judgments about the language, which he referred to as linguistic *dhauq*. Like Chomsky, he asserts on the role of repeated action in habit formation in the process of acquisition. According to him once a habit is firmly rooted through continuous and vigorous repetition, it becomes relatively permanent and difficult to remove, replace or uproot. An individual can attain perfection in only one habit and is rarely able afterwards to master another (Muqaddimah of Ibn Khaldun, 1967, p. 309).

Chomsky provides evidences to account for the uniformity and rapidity of first language acquisition. He stresses that different speakers of the same language, with different language experiences which they are exposed to, undoubtedly develop similar competence of that particular language. Further, Chomsky asserts that children acquire language with obvious uniformity which reflects that they have a genetic guidance in developing the grammar of their native language. Ibn Khaldun converges him by emphasizing that because languages are innate, their learnability is possible like the other innate things" (Muqaddimah of Ibn Khaldun, 1967 p.1080). He asserts that an individual acquires his mother tongue during childhood through repeated listening and communicating. He adds that this natural acquisition has nothing to do with the child racist origin. Listening, speaking and constant practice of language are required until the child language is modified by him.

Chomsky in the book *The Minimalist Program*(1995) suggests that the theory of language acquisition should satisfy the minimalism program (MP). The aim of this program is to find the fewest and simplest set of operations which can derive the structures of human language. In MP, roughly, these rules are basically to Select (choose some words), Merge (combine them), and Delete (remove anything not needed for understanding the sentence). What is often seen as Chomsky trying to "fix" his theories is really his trying to simplify and simplify the generalizations he (and other researchers) comes up with. Therefore, the minimalist program developed by him is motivated to a large extent by the desire to minimize the acquisition burden placed on the child and thereby maximize the learnability of natural language grammars (Andrew Radford, 1997, p. 7).

Ibn Khaldun hinted for the requirement of minimalist program in his book as Chomsky does. He stresses that for every meaning there is set of words, only limited number of words in the language identified in the dictionary which indicated that particular meaning. He notes also that the theory of language acquisition should indicate simplicity, and because people use language without artificiality, rules of languages should indicate so. He proved that with Prophet Muhammad's- Peace Be Upon Him- saying: "I have been sent with jawami al-kalim" (conciseness of speech; having many meanings comprised in a few words) (Muslim, Vol.1 p.265)." He adds that the language is transmitted from one generation to another by that simplified process of acquisition. (Muqaddimah of Ibn Khaldun, 1967 p.1088)

The last point of convergence between Chomsky and Ibn Khaldun in terms of language acquisition is their agreement on the existence of sensitive period of language acquisition (the critical period). The critical period states that the few years of the child's life are crucial and the most important years during which the native language is acquired. Ibn Khaldun referred to that crucial period when he writes about the corruption of language. He says that if non-native speakers migrate to another language environment before their mother tongue is established, they will have efficiency in the new language and the knowledge of their native language will be deficient. Thus, like Chomsky, he believes in the sensitiveness of the critical period of language acquisition.

IV. Why Chomsky not Ibn Khaldun?

After showing the points of convergence between Chomsky and Ibn Khaldun, one would wonder why Chomsky's observation about the nature of language and language acquisition was theorized, but not Ibn Khaldun's. Possible interpretations are related to the cultural circumstances influencing the interest in Arabic. Ibn Khaldun lived near the fall of the Islamic empire. So, westerners were unmotivated to take from Arabs, not to mention the social and religious clashes that had taken place during that time. Another possible reason is the retraction of the translation movement from Arabic. Further, the orientalist were not acquainted with Ibn Khaldun's writings until the second decade of the nineteenth century (Serafini, 2008) However, they put a veil on his character disallowing his great ideas to spread to the dark Europe at that time.

Therefore, it is evident that Chomsky benefited for Ibn Khaldun because of Ibn Khaldun's priority in life as well as in the publication of his book. Eventually, we can conclude with Moosa Hatamlah (2006), who wrote in one of his essays, that the concept "linguistic competence" which Chomsky proposed, had been proposed by Ibn Khaldun hundreds of years ago before Chomsky under the terms "al-malakah al-lessaniah"; and it is known that western scholars did not try to give any attention and that is not something strange for them. (p.69)

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