The ladder and the arch

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A group of about twenty linguists and one philosopher were having lunch at the 1974 Linguistic Institute at UMass, Amherst. I was a graduate student who had, like everyone else, been preoccupied with the issues that divided generative semantics (aka abstract syntax) from interpretive semantics (lexicalist syntax). During a lull in the conversation, I posed a question that had been puzzling me.

“Why is it,” I asked apropos of nothing in particular, “that the same people who prefer abstract syntax tend to like concrete phonology, while lexicalist syntax seems to go with abstract phonology?”

An answer came quickly. “That’s easy,” said the philosopher, Harry Bracken. “Language is a pairing of sound and meaning. Abstract syntax is concrete semantics. Those who are concrete with respect to meaning will also be concrete with respect to sound. It’s empiricism.”

In that moment, what had been a murky and obscure landscape was suddenly illuminated as by a bolt of lightning. In addition, I learned that if you have a really difficult question, it’s good to ask a philosopher, especially one as perceptive as Harry Bracken.

I recalled this scene while reading The Linguistics Wars (Oxford University Press, 1993), Randy Allen Harris’s detailed account of the struggle between generative and interpretive semantics. For someone who was not there and whose main field is rhetoric rather than linguistics, Harris presents a vivid recreation of the history of the dispute. He appears to have talked to almost everyone and to have read almost everything. Though he never states it all explicitly, his book puts forth a thesis about the history of linguistics and Noam Chomsky’s place in it. The thesis is abundantly illustrated with examples and quotations, the character sketches ring true, and the plot is interesting and plausible. So persuasive is Harris’s tale, that if I hadn’t been there, if I hadn’t had lunch with Harry Bracken, I might even believe it.

Harris’s story begins, appropriately, with the observation that language is a pairing between sound and meaning. According to Harris, the relation is a ladder, with one end planted in the accessible, solid material of sound, and its other end lost in the ethereal clouds of elusive meaning. Harris has a rather low opinion of the sound end of language; for him, linguistics is interesting to the extent it can account for meaning, which he equates with the mental and abstract. Meaning is, he writes, the “holy land”, the “promised land” of linguistics, the “good stuff”, the ultimate goal. Bloomfieldian structuralism was boring because it banished meaning from linguistics. Nevertheless, the Bloomfieldians were slowly climbing the sound-meaning ladder. Harris cites Charles Hockett as calling the 1930s “the Decade of the Phoneme”; the 1940s were ‘the Decade of the Morpheme”; and the 1950s were to be the Decade of the Sentence.

Chomsky came on the scene in the Decade of the Sentence. At first, the Bloomfieldians were pleased with his work, which built on that of Zellig Harris, since the study of syntax was entirely appropriate for the Decade of the Sentence. They were not so pleased when Chomsky began reconstruing the field in neo-Cartesian rationalist terms. But this renewed mentalism, in Harris’s view, added to the main attraction his program had for younger people: the promise that transformational grammar could lead them to the holy land of meaning.
The climb toward meaning quickened in the early 1960s with the formulation of the Katz-Postal hypothesis, and the work inspired by it led first to abstract syntax and then to generative semantics. According to Harris, these were natural, even inevitable, developments of Chomsky’s *Aspects* theory, but Chomsky himself did not take the lead in these developments. They were spearheaded by members of the next generation. In keeping with Harris’s thesis, this is only to be expected: the Decade of Semantics had arrived.

Now comes the first strange twist in the story. Suddenly, inexplicably, Chomsky reversed course and opposed the new theory. To readers who subscribe to Harris’s thesis, there is no mystery here. The man from the Decade of the Sentence had climbed as high up the ladder to meaning as he could. Like Moses, he could point the way to the promised land, but could not enter it. Rather than point the way and retire gracefully, he chose to block the path. By the start of the 1970s, Chomsky was on the verge of becoming “a sorry old crank”.

Here the story takes its second unexpected turn, one which Harris finds more remarkable than the first. Though Chomsky was fighting the inexorable logic of the program he himself had initiated, though he had no arguments to speak of, and though he had no real alternative to propose, he prevailed, against all odds. He succeeded through sheer stubbornness and brilliant rhetoric, aided by some inexplicable self-destructive behaviour by his opponents. With generative semantics in disarray, Chomsky finally managed, with the help of loyalist students, to stitch together a respectable theory which eventually became the new mainstream of generative grammar. The reader might well conclude, though, that the version of generative grammar we have today is in some way an unnatural fabrication, a holdover from the Decade of the Sentence in what should already be the Decade of Pragmatics, at the very least.

Harris reports that both Chomsky and George Lakoff disagree violently with his account, and I suspect that Harris might himself disagree violently with my reconstruction of his thesis. But it can be traced like a thread through the book, and it is wrong. It starts to go wrong on page 5: contrary to what is asserted there and throughout, meaning is not elusive and abstract; like sound, it is an observable mundane fact. If anything, the meaning of a sentence is plainer to us than its sounds. Even trained phoneticians require instrumental assistance to obtain an objective picture of the sounds of the sentence *John is easy to please*, but every speaker of English knows exactly what it means. Much of what we hear is illusory: we hear sounds that are not there, and ignore sounds that are there. There are no instruments capable of registering meaning, nor do we need them. This is not to say that it is trivial to arrive at a theory of meaning—that is quite another matter—but our experience of meaning is vivid and concrete.

The relation between sound and meaning, then, is not a ladder from the concrete to the abstract, but an arch. The two legs of the arch are planted in the ground of experience; it is at its most abstract in the middle. The path connecting the concrete domains of sound and meaning passes through the more abstract realms of phonology, morphology, and syntax. The great question at stake in the “wars” documented by Harris was: How abstract? How high is the arch?

Empiricists believe that experience plays a relatively large role in shaping knowledge of language. If that is true, then grammar should not stray too far from what is observable. For example, we might expect that syntax should be driven mainly by semantic considerations. The arch is low, never deviating too far from the ground of experience.

Rationalists, by contrast, believe that experience greatly underdetermines knowledge, the gap being filled by innate universal principles of language. On this view, syntax may have a rich formal structure that is independent of semantic considerations; the arch is high.

Chomsky’s objections to generative semantics did not stem from a refusal to climb up from syntax to the land of meaning. When Harris describes Haj Ross as pushing syntactic deep structure “toward abstraction, and toward meaning”, we should rather understand that he was pushing it away from abstraction and toward meaning. To continue further on that path would have required
Chomsky to abandon the most fundamental tenets of his program. How could he go along with that? Like a Ptolemaic astronomer who attributes retrograde motions to planets he thinks are revolving around the earth rather than the sun, Harris attributes erratic changes of course to characters he imagines to be moving on a ladder, when in fact they are making steady progress along an arch.

There was never a question as to whether one should study meaning or not. A similar debate was taking place at around the same time on the sound side of language, where it took the form of the “abstractness controversy”. At issue there was whether phonology was concrete, i.e., close to the phonetic ground, hence largely explainable in articulatory or perceptual terms, or abstract, i.e., subject also to formal cognitive principles not derivable from phonetics.

I do not want to blame Randy Allen Harris too much for missing this story. The fundamental issues that underlie disputes of this nature are seldom aired in print or even much discussed. He did the best he could with what he had, and he has produced an interesting and lively book. But he should have talked to Harry Bracken.