

In this excerpt from his book *Reflections on Language*, Noam Chomsky explains why he studies language and how the study of language relates to the study of knowledge.

In the excerpt, he claims that children have “relatively slight exposure” to language during their growing years. By this, Chomsky does not mean to imply that children do not hear language; rather, he suggests that they do not hear much formal language. This is because the language they hear is spoken language. When people speak, they often do so in sentence fragments, interrupt themselves and others, and change the subject.

Why study language? There are many possible answers, and by focusing on some I do not, of course, mean to disparage others or question their legitimacy. One may, for example, simply be fascinated by the elements of language in themselves and want to discover their order and arrangement, their origin in history or in the individual, or the ways in which they are used in thought, in science or in art, or in normal social interchange.

One reason for studying language — and for me personally the most compelling reason — is that it is tempting to regard language, in the traditional phrase, as “a mirror of mind.” I do not mean by this simply that the concepts expressed and distinctions developed in normal language use give us insight into patterns of thought and the world of “common sense” constructed by the human mind. More intriguing, to me at least, is the possibility that by studying language we may discover abstract principles that govern its structure and use, principles that are universal by biological necessity and not mere historical accident, that derive from mental characteristics of the species.

A human language is a system of remarkable complexity. To come to know a human language would be an extraordinary achievement for a creature not specifically designed to accomplish this task. A normal child acquires this knowledge on relatively slight exposure and without specific training. He can then quite effortlessly make use of an intricate structure of specific rules and guiding principles to convey his thoughts and feelings to others, arousing in them novel ideas and subtle perceptions and judgments. For the conscious mind, not specially designed for the purpose, it remains a distant

goal to reconstruct what the child has done intuitively and with minimal effort. Thus language is a mirror of mind in a deep and significant sense. It is a product of human intelligence, created anew in each individual by operations that lie far beyond the reach of will or consciousness.

By studying the properties of natural languages, their structure, organization, and use, we may hope to gain some understanding of the specific characteristics of human intelligence. We may hope to learn something about human nature; something significant, if it is true that human cognitive capacity is the truly distinctive and most remarkable characteristic of the species. Furthermore, it is not unreasonable to suppose that the study of this particular human achievement, the ability to speak and understand a human language, may serve as a suggestive model for inquiry into other domains of human competence and action that are not quite so amenable to direct investigation.

Source: From *Reflections on Language*. Noam Chomsky.

1. How does this excerpt demonstrate that Noam Chomsky is a rationalist?
2. Select one idea or statement that supports Plato's theory of knowledge and one that supports Descartes's theory. Explain how each does so.
3. Which theory of knowledge — Plato's or Descartes's — does Chomsky seem to support? Provide evidence of the analysis you conducted to reach this conclusion.