

Anarchy, power, festschrifts, and universals

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This paper discusses the concept of anarchy as the absence of power and power misuse by one of the most influential anarchists and his followers. I also discuss universals and the case of Pirahã. It is argued that there may not be any real non-trivial universals on the sentence level, but that there is a strong candidate for a universal on the text level: the festschrift universal. I also explain why Dan Everett is the first, last, and hence only person on this planet to get a Language Science Press festschrift.

1 Anarchy and power

Noam Chomsky is not only known for his linguistic work but also for his political views. He is an anarcho-syndicalist. His political followers like anarchistic ideas since anarchy is the absence of power. Humans live in self-regulated communities without oppression by a state or by a group of people who somehow gained an advantage at a certain point and then have (mis-)used it to indoctrinate, command, influence, or exploit other people.

But what is described in the movie *Grammar of happiness* (O'Neill & Wood 2012) and even more clearly in Pullum (2024), Chapter 2 of this volume, is exactly the opposite. Chomsky and others have made the statement that all languages may license an infinite number of utterances in principle (Hauser, Chomsky & Fitch 2002: 1571, Epstein & Hornstein 2005: 4, Hornstein, Nunes & Grohmann 2005: 7), however there are several languages that seem to contradict this claim (see Pullum (2024: 25–26, Section 3.1), Chapter 2 of this volume for a recent overview). Instead of admitting the mistake and restating the claim, which would be a real sign of greatness, Chomsky and other linguists from the US and Brazil have started a campaign against a single person with the aim of destroying that



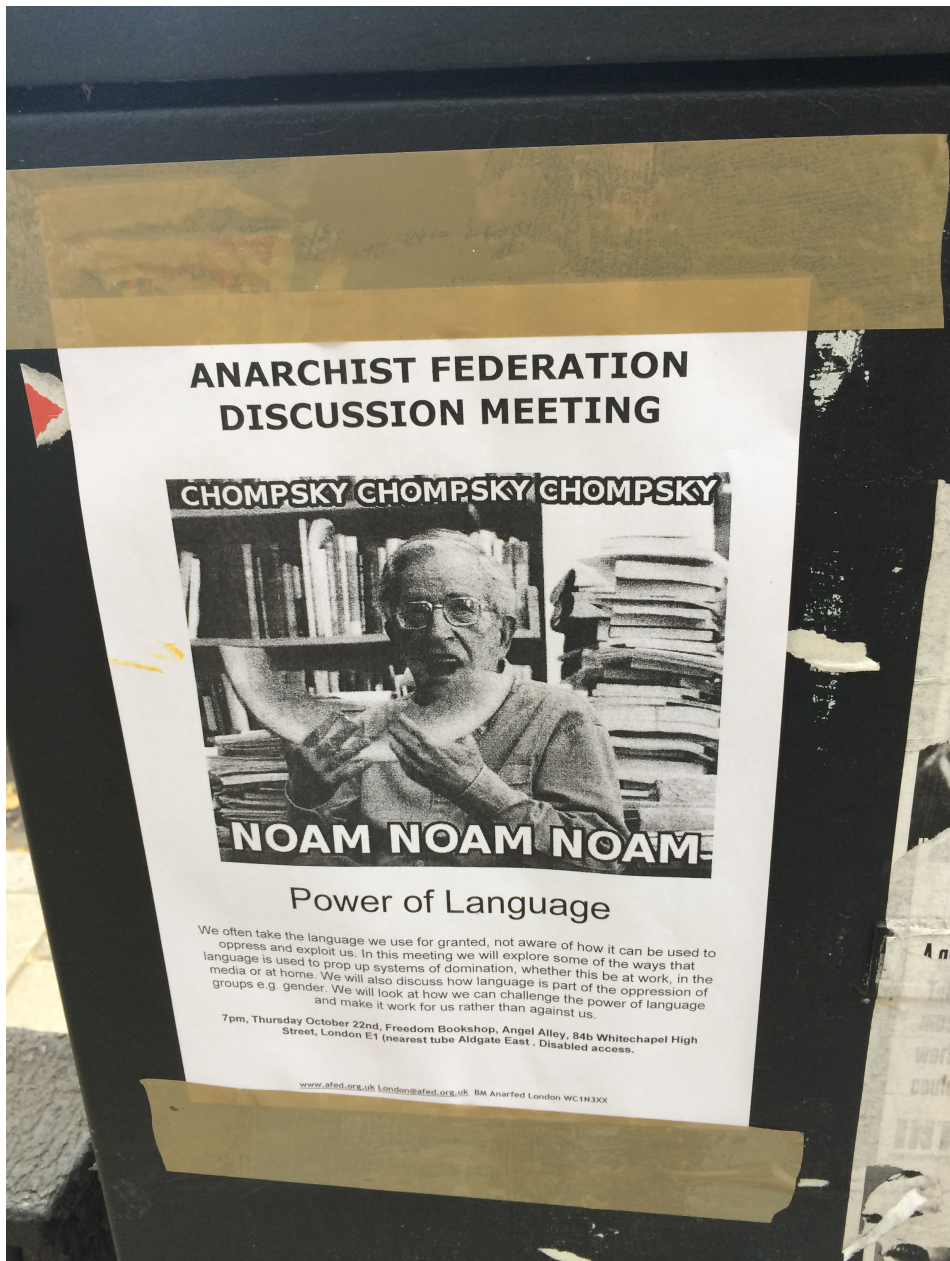


Figure 1: Noam Chomsky sometimes presents his more dangerous ideas using a cover name. This one is probably inspired by the chimpanzee Neam Chimpsky. Anarchist bookstore in London, 2015, picture: Stefan Müller

person's scientific career and harming his integrity. Given the situation the field of linguistics is currently in, this aggressive approach must be seen as a sign of weakness on the part of the attackers.

For somebody who is interested in languages and linguistics, such linguistic wars (Harris 1993) must have a repellent effect: Don't sleep, there are snakes!

2 Everett in Europe

While Pullum's piece reads well, as all of his papers do, it is also depressing. How could this happen? How could an anarchist gain so much power? [For non-linguists: No, the answer is not: "because he or his school of thought have always had better arguments than others." At least not for the past 30 years.¹]

One of the reasons I wrote this contribution is that there is good news: The measurable power of Chomsky drops suddenly after a distance of 5000 km from MIT. It almost reaches the European border but not quite, although it does extend to non-European countries like the UK, as described with respect to Oxford University by Pullum (2024: Section 2.8), Chapter 2 of this volume.

Europe has treated Everett quite differently from what is written in Pullum's paper. Everett has given talks at various Mainstream Generative Grammar (MGG) institutions like the Zentrum Allgemeine Sprachwissenschaft (ZAS) in Berlin. And he was invited to speak at the annual meeting of the Deutsche Gesellschaft für Sprachwissenschaft (DGfS), the analog of the LSA, and dominated by MGG researchers. The invited speaker is chosen by local organizers of the conference and in 2010 it was organized by the ZAS and the Humboldt-Universität zu Berlin.² The same DGfS conference had a workshop on recursion with Tecumseh Fitch, one of the authors of Hauser, Chomsky & Fitch (2002), as an invited speaker. The house was full and I remember lively discussions. Science as it should be.

Everett has been invited to Potsdam, which is also a stronghold of MGG, several times (2014, 2018). I also remember events with Ted Gibson at the ZAS where he discussed Pirahã.

¹Every time the Chomskyan framework has come too close to what other branches of syntax research are doing, Chomsky has changed fundamental assumptions about the architecture of the human language faculty. All derivational models so far have been fundamentally incompatible with psycholinguistic insights. This is really surprising since Mainstream Generative Grammar sees itself as research on one of our cognitive capabilities. So psycholinguistic evidence should be part of the empirical facts on which linguistic theories are built. See Wasow (2021) and Borsley & Müller (2021) for psycholinguistic facts and criticism about the architecture of Minimalism.

See also Lappin et al. (2000a,b, 2001) on Chomskyan "revolutions" in the Minimalist era.

²https://dgfs.de/jahrestagung/berlin_2010/programm_pv.htm, 2024-09-23.

I learned about the movie *Grammar of happiness* from my late colleague Gisbert Fanselow, one of the best German grammarians, who also worked in MGG. He told me that he was watching the movie with his students during the last lecture before Christmas. I then started to do the same. Given the power structure of the field, I normally would not have done this, but since he did this as a serious MGG grammarian, I felt that I was able to do the same. The fact that I initially would not have dared to watch the movie with students reminded me of GDR times, during which an official statement with the wrong content would have ended one's scientific career. But the fact that Gisbert had watched it indicates that the situation in Germany differed from that in the US.

So, the conclusion is: Things do not have to be the way they are in the US. While there are conflicts between the camps, they seem to be more civil and also more fruitful here. There have been joint workshops about Construction Grammar and Minimalism at the Freie Universität Berlin (2007, with Richard Kayne, Adele Goldberg, Gereon Müller, Anatol Stefanowitsch, and others),³ and a workshop on progress in linguistics with researchers from various frameworks present.⁴ There have been framework comparison events in Bergen, Norway (2005, PhD School Languages and Theories in Contrast), and Utrecht, Netherlands (2009, Comparing Frameworks). People talk to each other instead of talking about each other. Or rather in addition to. Starting in the 90s, there was an empirical turn in which researchers did not focus on the intricate suggestions developed by hardcore Minimalists but did more empirically oriented work instead.

3 Language Science Press and festschrifts

When Martin Haspelmath and I founded Language Science Press, we installed the rule that we would not publish festschrifts. The rationale behind this was that nobody in his or her right mind would publish a paper that could be published in *Language* or in the *Journal of Linguistics* in a festschrift. Festschrift papers are usually focused on the person to be honored, they describe how person X was important in the life of the author, how funny, honest, what a person of integrity X is. How helpful X was as a supervisor. Sometimes unpublished material that has been lying in some drawer for decades is recycled. This was the case with the only

³https://www.geisteswissenschaften.fu-berlin.de/izeus/media/program_comparing_languages_workshop.pdf, 2024-09-23.

⁴<https://hpsg.hu-berlin.de/Events/HPSG2013/progling.html>, 2024-09-23.

festschrift article I ever published (Müller 2017).⁵ This rejection of festschrifts is something I learned from the most famous German MGG researcher: Manfred Bierwisch. If I am not mistaken, he never published anything in a festschrift.

When we agreed on the no-festschrift rule, we left an escape hatch open: of course people can do a normal edited volume on a certain topic and give this to somebody as a present. But it should be a normal peer reviewed volume. In general, festschrifts are bad for Language Science Press, since they are expensive. Collections are more expensive than monographs since twenty different authors have twenty different ways of writing strange L^AT_EX code, misciting, doing funny things with figures, or of causing havoc in other unseen ways. Festschrifts are even worse since the authors are usually well-established scholars in the field, which means that all the problems mentioned above become increasingly severe combined with dramatically longer response times. Festschrifts usually come with strict deadlines, which stands in the way of enforcing quality standards. Our usual procedure of community proofreading/editing cannot be applied since the “non-festschrift” has to remain a secret until the day of presentation.

So far, Language Science Press has published six non-festschrifts (Bailey & Sheehan 2017, Bárány et al. 2020, Laszakovits & Shen 2021, McManus & Schmid 2022, Bower et al. 2017, Bonami et al. 2018), some of which were published in my series (Bower et al. 2017, Bonami et al. 2018). In the case of Bonami et al. (2018), the book itself is clean: there is no mention of a festschrift or tribute. But then a review appeared in *Language* by Bauer (2020) mentioning that the volume is a festschrift and who it honored.

The first five volumes of a new series are run through the press directors. After this we trust the series editors of the respective series to continue their good work. Some of the festschrifts appeared this way: I saw a tweet by Susi Wurmbrand saying thank you for her festschrift (Laszakovits & Shen 2021).

In the case of Bower et al. (2017), I missed the statement in the preface that the book is a tribute, but I saw the dedication in the catalog entry. While the book cannot be changed after publication, I changed the catalog entry and informed the editor of the book. This led to quite an email discussion and since the case was lost anyway, we put the dedication back in the catalog. Martin Haspelmath wrote

⁵Now it has a new citation. Including the citation in this paper, there are now seven citations on Google Scholar. All of them are self-citations. The paper is about embedding and recursion, by the way – that you cannot do it in inheritance networks, not even with defaults. So, maybe I am the only one who finds this relevant or the stuff in festschrifts is usually ignored. Either way, this is a further argument against festschrifts.

an email to me back then (p. m. 2017–05–23): “Besser machen bedeutet vielleicht: In Zukunft überhaupt keine Festschrift mehr akzeptieren.”⁶

The current volume was also an interesting case. I explained the no-festschrift policy several times to the editors. When I saw the first outline of the chapters, I remarked that “A journey into Dan Everett’s brain” sounds a bit too festschrifty. Geoff Pullum sent me a draft of his paper and told me about the workshop where he would be presenting this paper. I almost fell off my chair when I read the email since the URL of the workshop – probably widely distributed – contained the forbidden keyword “festschrift”.⁷ After all these discussions: Language Science Press does not do festschrifts! The workshop was great, and I especially enjoyed the journey into Dan Everett’s brain. This was not sloppy festschrift chitchat but serious science with brain images and so on. Still, it was specially tailored to Dan Everett and perhaps unpublishable in “normal” journals. Thus the planned volume would scream festschrift in every aspect, so that I felt it would be best to call it what it is, a festschrift, and then officially end the seemingly never-ending nightmare of Language Science Press (non-)festschrifts.

The team of press directors changed as of 2022–01–01 and Oliver Czulo stepped in for Martin Haspelmath. We discussed allowing festschrifts if the editors pay for it. Something like the 10,000€ that is usually charged by profit-oriented publishers.⁸ We abandoned this idea because it would suggest that we publish low-quality work for money. After endless discussions, we finally decided on the 5th of June 2023 to never ever do a festschrift again (starting 2024).

4 Universals

The interesting fact about festschrifts is that they create an infinite amount of work. This is somewhat surprising since the number of words and the number of references per chapter are strictly finite. Maybe Friedrich Engels’s insight is correct that a certain increase in quantity may result in a new quality (Engels 1873–1883: 349). This goes against everything mathematicians tell us, but who

⁶“Maybe improving things would mean rejecting festschrifts, without exception, in the future.”

⁷https://tedlab.mit.edu/everett_festschrift_2023.html, 2023–06–13. Note that the title of the page is *Everett Festschrift 2023* with a typo. I guess this was done on purpose to confuse the Language Science Press search robots which constantly monitor the web to find breaches of the no-festschrift rule.

⁸Brill charges €10,000/\$12,200 for 100,000 words/250 pages (<https://brill.com/page/oacharges>, 2024–09–23). Cambridge charges £10,500 (US\$13,000, €12,000) for 120,000 words and up to 85 figures (<https://www.cambridge.org/core/services/open-access-policies/open-access-books/gold-open-access-books>, 2024–09–23).

knows. On top of the amount of work caused in the editing process alone, we have had endless (!!!) discussions with authors and editors – some even involving Language Science Press’s advisory board – about what it means to publish a non-festschrift with Language Science Press. Since the discussions are endless, the editing process + discussion is definitely endless. This is not just what math tells us but is also supported by our feelings.

One of the weaker arguments for Universal Grammar, innate language-specific knowledge that helps learners in language acquisition, is the claim that there are language universals (Pinker 1994: 237–238, Chomsky 1998: 33). Whether there are such universals and whether they require the assumption of domain-specific innate knowledge to be explained is an ongoing debate (Hawkins 1988, Plank & Filimonova 2000, Evans & Levinson 2009a,b, Müller 2023c: Section 13.1). The response of researchers working in Mainstream Generative Grammar to claims about languages that seem to contradict putative universals is: Yes, but you cannot argue with unanalyzed data (Freidin 2009: 454),⁹ meaning that if you look at an OSV language long enough, you will realize that it is underlyingly SVO.¹⁰

⁹“Data alone cannot speak to the validity of explicit proposals about the content of UG. What is required is an explicit analysis of data that follows from a precisely formulated fragment of a grammar. This is a comment about methodology, independent of any particular linguistic theory. In science there is no alternative to providing explicit analysis of data. The discussion of UG in this article misses the mark entirely.” This statement is false. If a proposal is made that our linguistic machinery allows us to produce an infinite number of sentences and that it follows for all languages that sentences of arbitrary length may be formulated in all languages, then one language that has a maximal sentence length is a counterexample. (See Pullum (2024: 25–26, Section 3.1), Chapter 2 of this volume for a list of putatively finite languages.) If it is stated that Subjacency is a principle that holds for all languages, then it is sufficient to point out that there are examples of extraposition in German that show that this type of non-local dependency cannot cross just two NP boundaries but arbitrarily many (Müller 2004a, 2023c: Section 13.1.5). To make such claims about data, no elaborated formalized grammar is necessary. Some understanding of traditional grammar is sufficient. Sometimes MGG researchers state that examples of a certain kind are predicted by their theory not to be possible. It is then sufficient to find such examples without having a theory about these examples oneself. My dissertation and habilitation are full of such examples (Müller 1999, 2002), as well as of an alternative theory.

¹⁰See Chomsky (1965: 141) and Kayne (1994) for the claim that all languages are underlyingly SVO, McCawley (1970) argued for an underlying VSO order, Bach (1971) and Ross (1973) argued for OV, and Haider (2000, 2010, 2020) claimed that SVO languages are derived from an underlying SOVO pattern.

Note that I am one of those myself. After ten years of working in a more what you see is what you get (WYSIWYG) setting of linearization-based HPSG (Müller 2004b), I developed an analysis of seemingly multiple frontings that assumes SOV to be the underlying order of German clauses (Müller 2005a,b, 2023a). That German is an SOV language is the consensus among linguists working on Germanic. See Müller (2023b) for a discussion of Dryer (2013), whose classification is built on surface occurrences.

Ironically, using “unanalyzed data” is a very common practice among MGG grammarians. Often, they just cherry-pick arbitrary facts from papers describing understudied languages. See Fanselow (2004) for some criticism related to this matter.

As a syntactician one might be inclined to think that grammars should at least require the concept of valence. But if Koenig & Michelson (2012) are right, the Iroquoian language Oneida does not even have syntactic valence. So what we seem to be left with is the triviality that humans combine linguistic material to form larger units (Merge, Hauser et al. 2002, Müller 2015: 52), without any implications about possible sentence length. Note that we seem to require unheaded, flat structures for phenomena like *student after student after student* (Matsuyama 2004, Jackendoff 2008, Bargmann 2015, Müller 2021: Section 4.1). So the universal would be that we combine stuff. Nothing more. Not even a constraint on binary branching.

But note that I have found a different universal. A universal holding on the text level.

- (1) Observation holding at least for (English, French, and German):
Festschrifts cause an infinite amount of work.

I think this is a universal.

- (2) Universal 1 (conjecture):
All festschrifts in all languages cause an infinite amount of work.

Of course more research on this (to be published elsewhere) is needed. But I strongly believe that this conjecture also holds for languages like Pirahã: If we took a festschrift in any language, say English, and translated it into Pirahã, the situation would not improve. Given that the amount of work needed for the English draft is infinite, adding a translation into another language would not make it finite.

Of course there is the question of festschrifts originally written in the language of the final submission. What the result would be for the case of Pirahã is difficult to predict. In order to get an answer here, close collaboration with Dan Everett seems necessary. The first problem is that Pirahã does not have a writing system/culture. I guess the Pirahã people would not see the point in giving somebody a festschrift. But note that my statement is a statement about the cognitive abilities of scientists. Thus: If there were Pirahãian scientists producing festschrifts, these would cause an infinite amount of work. The older and more established Pirahãian scientists would not use reference managers, they would be sloppy and forgetful with respect to sources, and so on.

So, I think, I have found the only true universal: It is a virtual necessity that festschrifts lead to a disaster.

5 Conclusions

Language Science Press therefore invites everybody to publish their festschrifts with the competition and to publish either unedited low-quality stuff or create high costs for our competitors.¹¹ The press managers of Language Science Press have decided that there will not be any further (non-)festschrifts as of 2024. Since this volume is the first official festschrift of Language Science Press, Dan Everett gets the first, last, and only official festschrift published by Language Science Press. A truly outstanding achievement.

Afterthoughts

Of course all papers published up to now in Language Science Press non-festschrifts are exceptionally good. So they cannot be taken as examples of what I said above: papers of low quality, not really about linguistics, with strange argumentations, in a funny festschrift style, and never cited. There is one paper that is an exception: this one. I hope it will never be cited but often read.

Acknowledgements

I thank Sebastian Nordhoff for the final impulse to stop the festschrift madness. Blame him! I also want to thank Sebastian for sending me a list of BibTeX entries

¹¹De Gruyter is a good candidate, as they do not seem to care about quality. For example, the target article Trinh (2009) in *Theoretical Linguistics* contains 14 occurrences of the phrase *in other word*, which should have been *in other words*. Trinh's reply to replies (2010) contains three occurrences of this phrase. The phrase occurs 31 times in Trinh's MIT thesis (2011), which is based on the discussion paper, and 29 times in the book that was finally published by De Gruyter (Trinh 2019). The book contains an unbelievable amount of further typos. No editor, copy editor, or supervisor seems to have read the papers, the thesis, or the book. The content is also wanting: Trinh argues for a VP analysis of German verbal complexes. An earlier MIT dissertation with the same approach was heavily criticized by Reis & Sternefeld (2004). None of the arguments of Reis & Sternefeld were taken up by Trinh (ignorance of the supervisors, failure of the series editors at De Gruyter). Reis & Sternefeld's criticism and most of the field of Germanic syntax (MGG or alternatives) were completely ignored. See also Reis & Sternefeld (2004: 505) on the phenomenon of MIT theses exclusively citing work from the narrow MIT bubble.

for Language Science Press festschrifts, which he created with ChatGPT. The list was completely useless but fun. See Piantadosi (2024), Chapter 15 of this volume and Müller (2024) for more on ChatGPT. I thank Dan Everett for being the topic of my Christmas movie. I must have watched it at least 20 times by now.

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