

EDITORS' INTRODUCTION

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It is customary to refer to Noam Chomsky's *Aspects of the Theory of Syntax* as the founding document of Generative Grammar—and justifiably so. It was not Chomsky's first book, of course: his *The Logical Structure of Linguistic Theory* and *Syntactic Structures* had been completed almost a decade earlier. But the former only circulated in mimeographed form until it was finally partially published in 1975; and the latter was a rather informal write-up of lecture notes appearing with a small publisher in the Netherlands (as was the case with Chomsky's monograph *Current Issues in Linguistic Theory*, a year ahead of *Aspects*).

Aspects, in other words, was Chomsky's first thoroughly worked-out book-length articulation of the generative program and its significance to other fields, widely received thanks to the backing of a renowned publisher. Its groundbreaking first chapter on “Methodological Preliminaries” lucidly carved out the fundamentals of the nascent approach, defining the object of inquiry as “the ideal speaker's intrinsic competence” (dubbed *I-language* in Chomsky's later works) and thereby introducing the competence/performance distinction. It is not too far-fetched to say that this was the move that placed linguistics on scientific footing, by shifting the focus from the common-sense notion of “language” to a well-defined domain of inquiry.

Paving the way for Chomsky's philosophical follow-up *Cartesian Linguistics* (1966), this first part of *Aspects* is also an impressive defense of the rationalist view of language acquisition/growth—only on this conceptual foundation, Chomsky reasoned, can we feasibly aspire to *explanatory* (rather than merely observational or descriptive) adequacy. The rest is history: the quest for explanatory adequacy as defined in *Aspects* fueled the crystallization of the Principles & Parameters approach; and more recently, Chomsky launched the Minimalist Program as an attempt to go beyond this goal. Tempting as it is, we refrain at this point from going further into the profound impact this first part of *Aspects* had on the field; its lasting influence is aptly summarized in David Pesetsky's foreword to this volume.

The second part of *Aspects* moves beyond the conceptual level and develops certain technical details of the generative procedure in some detail. For the first time, *Aspects* presented a formal

model of grammar comprising transformationally related levels of representation, now fed by a lexicon. Some of the technical details, such as the use of features in subcategorization frames or the matching analysis of relativization, continue to figure prominently in the literature. Many others have, of course, been revised or replaced since—for instance, *Aspects*' shift away from Generalized Transformations in favor of a recursive base component and Chomsky's preference for concatenation over set formation have seen dramatic reversals in recent work, Chomsky's own in particular.

This volume is a celebration of *Aspects*' multifaceted impact on the field of linguistics, and a reflection on some of its leading themes 50 years into the game. As the reader will no doubt notice, the contributions in this volume differ quite significantly, ranging from short remarks to detailed technical analyses. We, the editors, deliberately chose not to counteract this heterogeneity, which bears testimony to the wide range of ideas and visions that *Aspects* continues to inspire. We hope that the volume persuades its reader to revisit *Aspects*, which we believe is a worthwhile exercise not only for historical reasons—after all, many of its central theses concerning the biological nature of language continue to be subject of debate, as Noam Chomsky points out in his preface to this volume. It's sometimes said that if you lose your way in the forest (a sensation that some of us may have nowadays in view of an increasingly fragmented field), it can be helpful to return to your starting point, from where you may be able to discern your original direction. In much the same vein, we believe, *Aspects* can serve as a reminder of where we were headed back in 1965, and still are today.