

# Cartesian Linguistics: A Chapter in the History of Rationalist Thought

Chomsky N

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**Chomsky N : Cartesian Linguistics: A Chapter in the History of Rationalist Thought** before purchasing it in order to gauge whether or not it would be worth my time, and all praised Cartesian Linguistics: A Chapter in the History of Rationalist Thought:

4 of 4 people found the following review helpful. Cognitive Revolution Before The 20th Century By Philonous This is a great book for someone who is interested in how Chomsky's theory of language acquisition and syntax are influenced by a series of philosophers from Descartes to Humboldt, which Chomsky calls the "Cartesian Linguistics". In fact, I would recommend it to anyone, especially non-linguists, so nobody has to be intimidated by a false impression that Cartesian Linguistics is a technical book for professional linguists. Chomsky picks out many interesting philosophical views from Descartes, Post-Royal, Humboldt, and others to give his readers at least three main ideas: First, there were philosophers and linguists before Chomsky who not only anticipated the cognitive revolution but also initiated it before it had to be revived again in the 20th century by Chomsky and others. Second, philosophers such as Descartes, Post-Royale, and Humboldt already knew some properties of language before Chomsky did. Descartes and Humboldt were very much aware of the creative aspect of language to generate an infinite set of sentences arranged in infinite ways that are still grammatical. Post-Royal were implicitly aware of the distinction between surface and deep structure as they point out that an uttered sentence is in fact composed of several propositions that are synthesized by some rule (which Chomsky called Transformational Rules) to get to the surface sentence. Most of these philosophers were also aware that how language is acquired is not through complete learning

or by analogy, but rather exposure to some external stimulus that activates innate and universal principles of language. Lastly, Chomsky tries to argue how the past linguistic tradition (Cartesian Linguistics) is still very valuable, important, and relevant to modern linguistics. I really enjoyed this book, I think it is very profound, but I only have at least two \*minor\* criticisms to make. First, Chomsky wrote a lot of the essential ideas from Cartesian Linguistics in his other later book called Language and Mind, specifically a chapter called Linguistic Contribution to the Study of Mind: Past. You may not find all of it in that chapter, but most of the essential ones are there: He talks about Descartes, Humboldt, and Post-Royale. So, for those who already read Language and Mind, reading this book may not seem very necessary unless you like to read Chomsky's book for its own sake. Second, Cartesian Linguistics is pretty short, apart from a long introduction written by Chomsky's colleague, it barely reaches 100 pages. One would wish that Chomsky could have written more, but perhaps this is all Chomsky could do for now since much philosophical works on language relevant to Chomsky's Universal Grammar is pretty hard to find. Nonetheless, despite these minor criticisms, reading the book Cartesian Linguistics is not a waste of time.

1 of 1 people found the following review helpful. A good perspective  
By Rafed A. Khashan  
This book provides a very good background to understand how Linguistics strove to edge its way into science. It provides a background that puts things into perspective and makes one understand issues in linguistics that are far beyond what the book proposes to tell.

1 of 2 people found the following review helpful. The Quintessential Paradigm Shifter. A timeless classic... ONCE.... NOW.... FOREVER.  
By thinking atheist  
What can you say about this book? This is beyond a classic! This is the kind of work that comes out once in a century, and pulls the carpet out from under everything we ever assumed about our discipline. Know this, if you have not read this book, you are NO LINGUIST, no matter how many degrees you have, or how many grants you have received.