

Chomsky and Lakoff: from Cognition to Language and Politics, and back

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Abstract The paper aims to compare two distant yet close conceptions of politics and political communication, that of Noam Chomsky, which matured since the second half of the last century, and that of George Lakoff, which came into vogue between the 1990s and 2000s. Chomsky and Lakoff are the heroes of the *Linguistics Wars* which redefined the physiognomy of US linguistics and cognitive science and also personify, each in his way, the figure of a *public intellectual*. Nevertheless, dealing with politics and communication, both fail to untangle the link between cognition, language, and propaganda: Chomsky moves, albeit contradictory, *from heaven to earth*, i.e., from the scientific investigation of language and mind to the non-scientific realm of historical events, whose analysis is entrusted to the citizen endowed with a Cartesian common-sense; Lakoff takes, instead, the reverse path, outlining a *political mind* that *embrains* the *ideologies* and consequently proposing *cognitive activism* which aims at reframing people's brain. Both approaches flow into an outdated, reductionist communication model, entailed in both first and second-generation cognitive science, which does not ponder the complexity of political and communicative practices enacted by semiotic-political animals.

Keywords: Noam Chomsky, George Lakoff, Political language, Political cognition, Political communication

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0. Introduction

Since the middle of the last century, Chomsky, the most renowned world-living linguist, has been constantly engaged in a critique of American and Western societies, developing a radical, pro-anarchist thought of which much has already been said. Since the times of the Vietnam War, his non-aligned positions have been applauded especially outside the motherland for his third-world sensitivities and his fierce critique of Western imperialism. A *rebel without a pause*, as U2's Bono has called him; a public intellectual *beyond the ivory tower*, who has won more criticism than acclaim (Barsky 2007: X).

On the other hand, Lakoff's political thinking, which has come to the fore in recent decades, moves on divergent positions, since he upholds and promotes the liberal-democratic ideals of the American left. While denying he is a propagandist or a spin-

doctor (Lakoff 2004: 100-01), his vocation for *cognitive activism* translates, as I will show, into neural terms the classical theory of *propaganda*, intended as an activity aimed at modifying people's brains and the related (unconscious) mental states, to persuade them to think and act according to a certain framing, predominantly evoked through emotional incitement.

Though, a comparison of their views results stimulating not only because of their different positions toward the US political system. First and foremost, they are the two undisputed protagonists of the *Linguistics Wars* (Allen Harris 1993): Chomsky is the «Hero of the Cognitive Revolution, architect of a theory of language and mind» that defeated behaviorism, «a legend of epochal proportions» (ivi: 5); Lakoff is the leader of that second-generation which radically attacked the disembodied computational conception of mind, enshrining the turnaround from a syntactic to a semantic-conceptual perspective hinged on the cognitive power of metaphor and imaginative thinking¹. In one way or another, these are the frontrunners who have redefined the physiognomy of US linguistics and cognitive science, with significant aftermaths also across the Atlantic. Two linguists *armed against each other*, and two public intellectuals. Accordingly, the comparison is rich in insights on both the cognitive-linguistic and the political-communicative sides, showing that these two secular heroes are more similar than both assume.

2. Chomsky: from heaven to earth

Chomsky is a spontaneous, non-Marxist activist (Ponzio 1973, 1982; Rossi-Landi 1978). His tireless battle for freedom proceeds in parallel with the advancement of his theory of language and mind based on nativism, internalism, and computationalism. For him, freedom, however, is manifested precisely in the creative use of language, the core of *human nature*, which includes the *foundational schematisms* genetically and biologically given that allow human beings to develop high cognitive functions, such as language, a *uniquely human organ* based on *recursion*.

Since the 1960s Chomsky (1966a) has been relaunching a *Cartesian linguistics*, which, considering the scientific findings of the sciences of the mind², he interprets in a non-dualist key. Indeed, he rejects *ontological and methodological dualism* and softens the *mind-body problem*³ advocating a «unification of the brain and cognitive sciences» as «an imminent prospect» (Chomsky 2002a: 62). Lucidly, from the 1960s transformational-generative grammar to the 1990s *Principles and Parameters Model* and the *Minimalist Program*, up to the current biolinguistics perspective, he has taken the side of naturalism and radical nativism, condemning not only behaviorism but all forms of semantic externalism or

¹ While generous with Chomsky, Allen Harris (1993: 5) provides an unapologetic biography of Lakoff: «An eager but transient Chomskyan, coiner of the term Generative Semantics; a tireless and ebullient, also restless and protean, evangelist for the movement; its most wide-ranging and creative force: husband of Robin».

² On the back of the ideological choice of circumscribing the biological groundings of knowledge and language, Chomsky goes far beyond the limits of science he himself delineates (cfr. Ponzio 1982: 428).

³ Given that human reason «is not the universal instrument that Descartes took it to be but rather a specific biological system» (Chomsky 1976b, in Chomsky, Foucault 2006: 121), «the issue about dualism can be set aside, while we search for an intelligible account of human thought and behavior, assuming that any principles that we may need in such an account will somehow – in ways to be discovered through further research – be related to facts about elements of the brain» (Chomsky 1983: 7).

culturalism.

Chomsky's investigation of human nature persistently rests on a linear conception of science⁴: a scientific theory in the Galilean-Cartesian sense is pursuable when it captures a piece of truth, that is, when a *kind of biological miracle* is performed (Chomsky 1976b, in Chomsky, Foucault 2006: 121). Though naïve and extensively criticized, this position has been relentlessly defended throughout the decades, representing one of its intractable tenets. Not by chance, the issue has been one of the *foci* of the debate with Foucault, which invests precisely in the historical foundation of human facts, including language. Indeed, Chomsky seems at some point forced to backtrack, admitting the combination of both intellectual and historical conditions at play in scientific "progress", nonetheless he obstinately confirms a prior interest in the *invariable principles* of human nature (ivi: 132).

With an unscrupulous rehashing of earlier philosophical sources⁵, the search for the *intrinsic property of the mind* leads to the hypothesis of a faculty or organ that miraculously exploded into its mature form in the evolutionary history of our species: language – the *Great Leap Forward* (Chomsky 2006: 184) – did not evolve but simply *popped* as an abrupt genetic change (cfr. also Chomsky, Berwick 2016). However, this research has no immediate relevance when moving *from heaven to earth*, that is, from scientific inquiry to politics and social analysis and action⁶.

The lack of connections between the job of the scientist and that of the political activist depends on the different attitudes required by the two tasks: science requests complex skills of conceptual abstraction, whereas the analysis of social facts does not lead to any theory. Politics understood both as an activity and as a reflection on society is a non-scientific, pre-theoretical task that can (and should) be entrusted to the common individual endowed with generic "Cartesian" common sense and "healthy" skepticism (Chomsky 1976a, in Chomsky, Foucault 2006: 69).

This conception of politics as a non-specialist sphere of human activity entails a *Leninist populism* traced back to a fertile stream of socialist thought: condemning the very genesis of the *intelligentsia*, intermediate bodies, and mass media – all creatures and voices stemming from the ideological control system – the pro-anarchist activist believes that it is necessary to entrust the political analysis to the militant who is not conniving with

⁴ Besides, one might glimpse here the background of that *manifest destiny* (Stephanson 1995) that permeates the whole US culture and political thinking. While fiercely contesting the expansionist, imperialistic policies of US governments pervaded by the *myth of the frontier* and denying the entrustment of the salvific mission to a *chosen people*, Chomsky still trusts in a *secular revelation* involving all humanity as a chosen species.

⁵ «I think it is possible to turn toward earlier stages of scientific knowledge, and by virtue of what we know today, to shed light on the significant contributions of the period in a way in which the most creative geniuses could not, because of the limitations of their time» (Chomsky 1976b, in Chomsky, Foucault 2006: 136). Regarding linguistic theory, the case of Humboldt as a forerunner of *Cartesian linguistics* (Chomsky 1966a) remains an emblematic misunderstanding as well as the extreme disembodied curvature imparted to the Cartesian dualism.

⁶ «If there is a connection, it is on a rather abstract level. I don't have access to any unusual methods of analysis, and what special knowledge I have concerning language has no immediate bearing on social and political issues. Everything I have written on these topics could have been written by someone else. There is no very direct connection between my political activities, writing and others, and the work bearing on language structure, though in some measure they perhaps derive from certain common assumptions and attitudes with regard to basic aspects of human nature» (Chomsky 1976a, in Chomsky, Foucault 2006: 68).

power, malignant as such⁷.

That the intelligentsia flaunts a specific “esoteric” knowledge is precisely the result of the original ideological distortion⁸. Therefore, it is no coincidence that intellectuals and their sounding board, the media system – a «corporate oligopoly», that is «the natural system for capitalist democracy» (Chomsky 1989, in Chomsky, Arnove 2008: 490-91) – are the first targets of Chomsky’s social criticism. Intellectuals and academic apologists are *secular priests* who deceptively work on the side of the masses; their pseudo-analysis is subservient, aimed in any case at maintaining the established order. As is well known, these accusations are mainly aimed at the US, which Chomsky, recalling anecdotes from the founding of the nation to the Vietnam War to the present day, bluntly considers a fascist country whose religion is the sanctity of the individual in relation to the state (Chomsky 1966b, in Chomsky, Arnove 2008: 321-22).

Just as the linguist Chomsky exploits classical thinkers to offer ideal support for his theory, the political Chomsky also rereads various authors emphasizing individual statements in support of his naturalistic reductionism, which leads to the emphasis on freedom as a *human value* outside history. His radicalism is nourished by the anarcho-liberal and anarcho-socialist traditions⁹, which he interprets in opposition to those who have rooted in the history of the masses the possibility of a revolution, of a *change in the present state of things*, not only through the violent practice of certain maximalism but also through a reformist action within the perimeter of the democratic state founded on universal suffrage. It is precisely on this base that he contests Foucault’s ambition for a class struggle¹⁰.

Against the power and its defenders, he evokes the dissolution of the state in terms of Bakunin’s *La Commune de Paris et la notion de l’état* (1892), where the Russian thinker draws the difference between authoritarian and libertarian socialism (Chomsky 1970, in Chomsky, Arnove 2008: 192, n. 12). And indeed, emphasizing a natural, spontaneous drive that leads humanity to struggle against power in all its forms, the aversion to that *certain* Gramsci is not surprising at all: Gramsci’s reflections are rooted *on earth*, where people are encouraged to acquire a class consciousness in order to gain the *hegemony* that will enable them to build a *new order*. Chomsky (1975: 128), instead, reproaches him with

⁷ «Any cook can run the State» is the (perhaps apocryphal) adage attributed to Lenin. Not surprisingly, the anti-Marxist Chomsky advocates the libertarian anti-authoritarian suggestions of *State and the Revolution* (cfr. Chomsky 1970, in Chomsky, Arnove 2008: 201; cfr. also Ponzio 1982).

⁸ This use of *ideology* would request a more extensive scrutinization. From first glance, Chomsky slips from the predominant Marxist negative sense, according to which the ideology is the distortion to unmask, to its extensive sense of system of values allowing a vision of the world (cfr. Freedon 2003; for a critical semiotic approach, cfr. Ferretti 2023). Chomsky also grasps what Lakoff would call the “Orwellian” use of the term (see § 3), remarking that the *secular priests* (propagandists and technocratic and policy-oriented intellectuals) use *ideology* to refer to a «deviation from the doctrines of the state religion», advocating a pragmatism based on the “end of ideologies” (Chomsky 1978, in Chomsky, Arnove 2008: 319).

⁹ «Though Chomsky would at times downplay or deny the connection, his political and linguistic work have both built on the philosophical tradition that he has traced back from contemporary strains of anarchism through “classical liberalism” to the Enlightenment and the early rationalists of the seventeenth century» (Arnove 2008: 12). Appropriately, Ponzio (1973, 1982) speaks of a liberalism that attempts to overcome its own contradictions by taking refuge in freedom as a natural gift outside of history.

¹⁰ «The task of a reformer or revolutionary is to gain power, not to bring about a more just society. Questions of abstract justice are not posed, and perhaps cannot even be posed intelligibly. Foucault says, again if I understand him correctly, that one engages in the class struggle to win, not because that will lead to a more just society» (Chomsky 1976b, in Chomsky, Foucault 2006: 138-39).

«a questionable reading of Marx», given that the Italian thinker acknowledges to the German philosopher the innovation of having demonstrated that it does not exist «an abstract, fixed, and immutable ‘human nature’», since it is historically determined by social relations.

On the heels of the rejection of both the foundational principles of the authoritarian, capitalistic state and the Marxist aspiration for a class struggle, Chomsky pursues a double aim: «For my part, I would distinguish two intellectual tasks. One is to imagine a future society that conforms to the exigencies of human nature, as best we understand them; the other, to analyze the nature of power and oppression in our present societies» (Chomsky 1976b, in Chomsky, Foucault 2006: 138). Likewise, scientific progress and the process of liberation from power turn out to converge in the long run¹¹, so that a connection between science and politics could be traced in the conception of human nature as a space of freedom and creativity that opens between biological and genetic constraints (cfr. Ponzio 1982: 434). But without dwelling on Chomsky’s fascinating, albeit pre-theoretical, view, I come to the point.

The stark divide between the scientific investigation of human nature and socio-political analysis reveals, I believe, the limitations not so much of the political activist as of the language theorist Chomsky. Indeed, the strenuous resistance to disengaging the organ of language from linguistic practices results in a theory that cannot include propaganda, that is, the intimately rhetorical nature of ordinary language, maximally at work in political language. This anti-historical bias determines the necessity to place semantics and pragmatics outside of the organ of language, and out of “pure” linguistics. Chomsky seems aware of this epistemological limitation: while acknowledging that the I-Language is connected to other interfaces, he continues to defend the principle of modularity, concluding that the intentional-conceptual and the pragmatic systems are (however mysteriously) collateral to language *in the narrow sense* (Hauser, Chomsky, Fitch 2002). In short, the human experience of meaning ends up being relegated to the ranks of enigmatic phenomena, and he is forced to appeal to another horizon to deal with politics as a discursive activity, which is hardly relatable or reducible to an innate mind-brain module whose functioning implies mere calculability (*Merge*, cfr. Chomsky 2006: 183-84).

Either way, Chomsky does not aim to provide a theory of language as a communication device, or of languages. Both restrictions are perfectly consistent with the assumptions and purposes of his program: on the one hand, communication is not necessarily related to the theory of language, given that the «key computational capacities evolved for reasons other than communication» (Hauser, Chomsky, Fitch 2002: 1569); on the other hand, *languages* are surface phenomena whose idiosyncratic structures are irrelevant for a scientific analysis of their innate source.

Denying any scientific relevance of the facts occurring *outside the head*, precisely those that happen on earth, in history, and among human communities, he rejects all political theories, which are to him merely chatter, empty words to hide the truth, a trick that the devotees of the dominant ideology use to found, legitimize, and defend their power: «any other term of political discourse, and you’re going to find the same thing: the terms of political discourse are designed so as to prevent thought» (Chomsky 2002b: 41). Although delving into lexical reflections to expound the genesis and preservation of the

¹¹ Chomsky himself admits that the theory of language «provides a useful model to which one can refer in the investigation of human knowledge» (Chomsky 1976b, in Chomsky, Foucault 2006: 117).

dominant ideology, Chomsky reacts with furious intolerance to the sermons of intellectual and political scientists: «when words like “dialectics” come along, or “hermeneutics,” and all this kind of stuff that’s supposed to be very profound, like Goering, “I reach for my revolver”» (ivi: 230).

Meanwhile, Lakoff sketches out a theory of communication. A poor, oversimplified theory, also indifferent to history, and perhaps even riskier on a socio-political level as well as more contiguous to behaviorism, the enemy that cognitive science overtly aimed at overwhelming.

3. Lakoff: right inside the *political mind*

Unlike Chomsky¹², Lakoff believes that political cognition and communication can be treated as scientific issues, based on two assumptions: (1) the existence of frames as neural devices; (2) the fact that thought is physical and mostly unconscious.

Although both statements, taken seriously, lead to an obsolete conception of language and communication – i.e., a neural-code model – Lakoff’s suggestions have been hailed as a *Copernican revolution*, whose main merit is to have shown that «when you control the language, you control the message, and the media does the rest» (Hazen 2004: XII). Understandably, Lakoff’s bestsellers result attractive to journalists, activists, spin doctors, and perhaps even some semioticians, yet the whole picture regarding the knot of the relationship between cognition and political language is even more inconsistent than Chomsky’s. He does not consider, for instance, that each element involved in political activity has its own intrinsic complexity, its own grammar, nor that language is *political* in a deeper sense¹³.

As is well known, Lakoff’s analyses can be epitomized in the famous joke «Don’t think of an elephant! Whatever you do, do not think of an elephant!» (Lakoff 2004). Given that it is impossible not to think of an elephant when such a word is perceived, he concludes that a word «evokes a frame, which can be *an image or other kinds of knowledge*» (ivi: 3, *emphasis mine*).

I must set aside the question of the equivalence of frame and (mental) image, and I also avoid commenting on that “other kinds of knowledge”, sharing the abjuration of a definition of meaning related to (conscious) schemata or (unconscious) mental images, since «they must always come equipped with instructions about how they are meant to be interpreted» (Itkonen 2008: 285-86). What is relevant is that, for Lakoff, an individual cannot help but think of an elephant when the word appears, so to speak, in his perceptual field. But is this activation *enough* to understand how meanings are built, converge (and diverge) among people in specific cultures, contexts, and practices?

Regarding the semantics of political concepts, Lakoff (2006: 178) takes up a suggestion by Gallie (1956), who emphasizes that they are *essentially contested*, for they are meaningful but do not have *fixed meanings*. In brief, some words are too vague to carry a non-ambiguous meaning. Yet, given the generality of the statement, one may agree that each

¹² I set aside the ideological friction between the two. However, as Chomsky puts it, Lakoff could be included in the ranks of the *academic apologist*, whose analysis «are a monstrous irrelevance in the face of the effort that is required to raise the level of culture in Western society to the point where it can provide a “social lever” for both economic development and the development of true democratic institutions in the Third World – and for that matter, at home as well» (Chomsky 1966, in Chomsky, Arnove 2008: 93).

¹³ Cfr. Coseriu’s (1987) quite unknown insightful contribution.

(political) word *evokes* a frame (or a *semantic field*, an *ideology*, that is, a network of related words or *forms* that shape a conceptual sphere) within which the value of each unit is contextually determined¹⁴. However, only apparently Lakoff grasps a property of natural-historical languages, i.e., the *indeterminacy of meaning* (cfr. De Mauro 1982), for he negatively assesses the *essentially contested* nature of political words and proposes *cognitive activism* to reduce or eliminate vagueness and make political communication *effective*.

Circumventing the issue of the socio-historical nature of meaning, which deems the indeterminacy as one of its physiological resources¹⁵, while acknowledging that (1) words can refer to different framings, such as the progressive *vs* conservative views, and that (2) one of the two, namely the latter, has become pervasive – with a proper political lexicon, *hegemonic* – he draws the conviction that, being the extension of the sense of (political) words *constrained* by brain-based frames, one should operate on the brain, not on the plane of the semiotic praxis. Coherently, on the heels of the Conceptual Theory of Metaphor (Lakoff, Johnson 1980) and the subsequent neural approach (Gallese, Lakoff 2005), he argues that, like metaphors, frames and narratives are not merely linguistic or conceptual structures since *facts of brain*¹⁶.

The *neural turn* further downplays the cognitive role of language, which the former embodied approach¹⁷ had already reduced to a *mirror* of the underlying conceptual structures (cfr. Diodato 2020).

The Lakoffian conception of language, which in the divulgation books is rather obscure (cfr., for instance, Lakoff 2006: 14-5) is better clarified in Gallese and Lakoff (2005: 456), aimed at dismantling early cognitivism's assumptions that «concepts are symbolic representations by nature, and as thinking, they can be reduced to symbolic (not neural) computation». Conversely, the authors point out that «conceptual knowledge is embodied, that is, it is mapped within our sensory-motor system», which «not only provides structure to conceptual content, but also characterises the semantic content of concepts in terms of the way that we function with our bodies in the world» (ibidem). Their rejection of *supramodality* (i.e., the idea that the brain contains separate modules for action and perception that need somehow to be associated), and their plea for *multimodality* (i.e., action and perception use the same neural substrates, so their modalities «are integrated at the level of the sensory-motor system itself and not via

¹⁴ This point would deserve further scrutinization. In fact, the meaning of the linguistic unit can be understood as determined by the system only if the latter is understood as open, mobile, rooted in time and in the speaking mass (cfr. De Mauro 1965).

¹⁵ Against the Russellian definition of concepts as logical entities based on «a list of necessary and sufficient conditions» connected with the «truth in the world», Lakoff (2006: 178) recalls, among others, Wittgenstein and Austin and concludes that «concepts don't exist in some abstract philosophical universe, where they can somehow be distinguished from “conceptions” or “instantiations”. Each person has a concept that makes sense to him or her. That concept is instantiated in the synapses of the brain. No brains, no concepts» (ibidem). A conclusion that both the philosophers would have surely rejected.

¹⁶ Besides, the neural approach erases the appeal to *experiential realism* or the *embodiment* (Lakoff, Johnson 1980, 1999) and ends up considering the world outside the brain as irrelevant to the here-and-now determination of meaning.

¹⁷ «Lakoff and Johnson's experientialism – what they later call 'embodied realism' – accounts for matters of knowledge in terms of an individual mind confronting the outside world, based on a residual Cartesianism» (Leezenberg 2009: 146). Their approach already harbored a romantic conception of culture which «relegate cultural variation to the status of a mere surface phenomenon that has no important influence on cognitive processes» (ivi: 141). (I am grateful to the anonymous reviewer for this helpful suggestion).

higher association areas») hardly justify the fairly tautological conclusion that «language makes use of concepts. Concepts are what words, morphemes, and grammatical constructions express. Indeed, the expression of concepts is primarily what language is about» (ivi: 473). Briefly, the dissatisfaction with early cognitivism ends up throwing the baby out with the bathwater (cfr. Sonesson 2007).

Anyhow, consistently with the neural hypothesis, for Lakoff, it is the brain that *means*, in both senses that (a) to understand how language works, one must investigate cognition, that is, the brain, and (b) it is the brain that (unconsciously) creates meanings. Again, an anti-Chomskyan position leads to a more extreme conclusion than Chomsky's: language is a matter of neuroscience, with no more *mystery*.

Regarding politics, Lakoff announces that the US political thinking moves between two extremes, two *Idealized Cognitive Models* (Lakoff 1987) based on the conceptual metaphor *The nation is a family*. He pretends, in fact, to have discovered that the two models – the authoritarian father (conservative) and the nurturing parent (progressive) – are, like any other cultural model or narrative, «in our brains. We are going to use them “automatically”, without conscious control or even recognition most of the time» (Lakoff 2006: 34-5).

However, while conservatives have somehow learned the lesson and correctly evoke frames consistent with their model, also making use of *Orwellian language*¹⁸, progressives still follow the old Enlightenment myth *the truth will make us free*. In fact, they *tell the facts*, assuming that people are rational, and will come to the *right* conclusions. Unfortunately, they ignore that cognitive science has proved that the myth is false because people think in frames (Lakoff 2004: 17). Moreover, being committed to fostering a *rational* truth, progressives also reject exploiting *emotions*, which play a crucial role in cognitive and neural processes (cfr. Damasio 1994). In brief, illuminist-rationalist progressives suffer from *hypocognition*¹⁹, i.e., a lack of ideas, of a fixed and relatively simple frame that can be emotionally evoked by a word or two (Lakoff 2004: 24).

If so, on the one hand, on the heels of a cognitive embodied approach, Lakoff rejects the notion of truth as relative to a pre-given objective world, which can be grasped through rational-disembodied and formal-semantic procedures; on the other hand, he still commits to an unexplained truth-level, arguing that *to tell the truth is not enough* to obtain political consensus. In fact, he continues, the truth must be said, but fitting people's frames (ibidem).

Lakoff's neural reductionism reaches its zenith, affirming that, since beliefs, opinions, and decisions do not change through language (i.e., *simply telling the fact*), the cognitive

¹⁸ «This is the use of Orwellian language – language that means the opposite of what it says – to appease people in the middle at the same time as you pump up the base. That is part of the conservative strategy» (Lakoff 2004: 22). Luntz, the author of the guidelines for Conservatives' language use, suggests several examples: women like certain words, such as *love, from the heart, and for the children*; people who support environmentalist positions like the words *healthy, clean, and safe*. Given that these words fit their frame, they support Conservative, although their policies pursue the opposite ends. For Lakoff, «this kind of language use is a science. Like any science it can be used honestly or harmfully». The progressive cognitive activist is invested with a moral task; another issue, that of the relationship between moral and politics, that I must set aside.

¹⁹ Hypocognition seems a consequence of the “end of history” (Fukuyama 1992) or of the “end of ideologies”, a complex ideological shift that has gone through the *Short Century* (see, among others, Freeden 2003). In this regard, Lakoff's position is inherently post-ideological, assuming post-ideologism as an ideology based on the supposed defeat of grand transformative narratives by moving, as Chomsky puts it, from conformism with respect to power to the pragmatism of immediate electoral success.

activist must *manipulate* neural-based frames which provide “wrong” (conservative) or “correct” (progressive) meanings. As a result, he suggests a prescription healing the Democrats’ cognitive disease: progressives need (new) concepts expressed by words organized in simple frames. Once the ideational work is done, they need to *repeat them over and over* to fix them in voters’ brains to strengthen their wing, both orienting people in the middle and hopefully converting the opposite-wing supporters (Lakoff 2004: 26). Yet, such a prescription, although brain-bound, reminds the classical propaganda theory developed from Le Bon’s *Crowd Psychology* (1895). In fact, this *neural rewiring* proposes in disguise the old conception of behavior as the result of *suggestion* and *imitation*, for people, if not controlled, behave emotionally, irrationally, or even hysterically (cfr. Ferretti 2022).

Hence, the evidence that cognition is not governed *only* by logical, formal, or rational principles but is the result of complex cognitive processes in which *also* emotions play a crucial role leads to an imbalance in favor of the irrational sphere, which nullifies the individual’s freedom, erasing his ability to *consciously* reflect on his actions. Notwithstanding, a sphere of rational planning is accredited to the cognitive activist, able to control people’s unconscious processes. Like the leader of Le Bon’s crowds (Ferretti 2022: 243 ff.), he knows how to use language to manipulate the individual mind, directing it toward “true”, and “correct” behavior, and finally to the “right” political choice. As a result, a real *democratization of knowledge* is achievable only if everyone becomes such a leader, that is, if each individual gains the *freedom to control his mind, making the unconscious conscious* (Lakoff 2006: 19).

Taking the neural hypothesis to extremes, the appeal to *cognitive unconscious* turns out to be the critical fulcrum. Evidently, Lakoff puts it not in the psychoanalytic sense²⁰ but following the presumed neuroscientific evidence that most of our thinking is «reflexive-automatic, uncontrolled», like the knee reflex (Lakoff 2006: 9): «what most people are not aware of, and are sometimes shocked to discover, is that most of our thinking – an estimated 98 percent – is not conscious»²¹.

Dealing with the notion of (un)consciousness, particularly in its relationship with language, is beyond the scope of this paper. It would bring into play, among many others, the issue of the representational nature of conscious phenomena, not to mention that the *unconscious* is a highly controversial notion itself (cfr. Kihlstrom, Barnhardt, Tataryn 1992; Berlin 2011). Several phenomena could belong to the sphere of unconsciousness: semantic priming; tacit, implicit, and procedural knowledge; implicit learning; implicit and declarative memory; subliminal perception, and creativity, all involve different kinds of unconscious cognitive activity, which, however, still prevents the conclusion that *all or most* cognitive activity is *unconscious*. Once again, skirting an intricate debate, Lakoff passes off as a neuroscientific “discovery” an issue that is far from settled (moreover, a cognitive theory of the unconscious would require a specular theory of consciousness, which is also far from being attained). To a careful look he, however, seems to refer to the *neural unconscious* (Spivey 2006), a similarly unreliable hypothesis, equally far from unraveling the dilemma of the intertwining of neural functioning and the spheres of (un)consciousness.

²⁰ On the relation between psychoanalysis and neuroscience, see, for instance, Talvitie (2009) and Leuzinger-Bohleber, Arnold, Solms (2016).

²¹ The calculation is attributed to Gazzaniga (1998). In Lakoff, Johnson (1999: 13) it amounted to 95 percent.

Without even realizing of moving on slippery grounds, Lakoff optimistically envisages a *New Enlightenment* in which the cognitive activists provide a *fixation of meaning*, which would, still, imply both the conformity to some notion of, so to say, extra-neural truth, and the degradation of the normative, conscious nature of language, which, as a historical, intersubjective technique of construction of humans' socio-cultural world (cfr. Coseriu 1987; Zlatev 2007: 303), shapes our space both of power and freedom.

4. Conclusion

As shown, both first and second-generation cognitive science heroes are incapable to deal with flesh-and-blood semiotic animals, engaged in real communicative praxis. In conclusion, let me thus remind Foucault's response to Chomsky:

What if understanding were a complex, multiple, non-individual formation, not "subjected to the subject", which produced effects of truth? One should then put forward positively this entire dimension which the history of science has negativized, analyze the productive capacity of knowledge as a collective practice, and consequently replace individuals and their "knowledge" in the development of a knowledge which at a given moment functions according to certain rules which one can register and describe (Chomsky, Foucault 2006: 17).

Yet, while Lakoff aims to package effective slogans in the service of political marketing, Chomsky (1996), with his peculiar attitude, is at least aware that «life is a complex affair, we understand very little about humans and society, and grand pronouncements are generally more a source of harm than of benefit».

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