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## Wallace Chafe – a visionary pariah among linguists

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**WALLACE CHAFE – A VISIONARY PARIAH AMONG  
LINGUISTS***Jiří Lukl*

If this book has a higher purpose, it is to provide a bit of evidence that sooner or later we will have to restore conscious experience to the central role it enjoyed in the human sciences a hundred years ago. Much, I believe, depends on such a reorientation (Chafe 1994, 7).

THESE words conclude the introductory chapter to *Discourse, Consciousness and Time*, the defining work of the linguist Wallace L. Chafe, who passed away February 3, 2019. I believe they characterize well the core of his linguistic thinking that if we are to achieve a measure of true understanding of language, we need to study it as an expression of, and a window to, consciousness.

Wallace Chafe was born in 1927 in Cambridge, Massachusetts. In his own words, so reminiscent of the child-like enthusiasm with which he approached his subject matter, from an early age he was fascinated “by the way ideas come and go in my consciousness. I have marveled at my ability, [...], to have thoughts that have nothing to do with what is going on around me, by the ability of language to capture and communicate those thoughts, and by the different ways both speaking and writing allow my consciousness to participate to some degree in the consciousness of others” (1994, 4).

Being a person of many interests, Chafe did not originally pursue linguistics as his career path. After a period of time spent in the US Navy at the end and after the Second World War, he enrolled in Yale to first study music, then architecture and finally German literature. He graduated in German literature in 1950 (Dpt. of Linguistics, UCSB, 21 Feb 2019) and only then did he give any serious thought to the study of linguistics.

After a prolonged sojourn in Switzerland, he returned to Yale in 1954, this time as a graduate student in the university’s linguistics program (2002, 246). There, Chafe began the long journey that would take him along a path from the specifically Bloomfieldian American flavor of structuralism to a brief encounter with generative semantics until he eventually found himself drawn to the study of language and the mind, and their intimate relationship. Nevertheless, Chafe devoted his graduate studies to the investigation of indigenous languages of North America, also a life-

long passion. In this respect professor Floyd Lounsbury was Chafe's major influence and the one who introduced him to the Iroquoian family of languages (2002, 247). Chafe decided to inquire into Seneca, a language that Lounsbury did not pay that much attention to, and in 1958 completed a dissertation on its morphology, which was later published as a monograph (1967). Since then, Chafe had done research and published many articles not only on Seneca, but also on other Iroquoian languages, like Onondaga, and on the languages of the Caddo family. His passion for the native languages themselves was matched by his enthusiasm for field linguistics, from which he derived much joy. He even suggested that where the study of languages is concerned field linguistics is "the purest application of the scientific method" (2002, 248).

Aside from being an insightful and inspiring linguist, Chafe was also a gifted writer. He was able to discuss the most complex issues in a simple, engaging, yet still highly academic manner. His writings are full of hidden jokes, amusing quips<sup>1</sup> and sometimes even more or less covert sarcastic remarks towards areas and methods of linguistic inquiry which he considered to be at best not very useful, at worst utterly detrimental to the advancement of the field. The most derisive remarks were reserved for the behaviorist tradition in both psychology and linguistics (see e.g., 1994, 12–14), and for generative linguistics, of which he remarked "that linguistics without generativism would have enjoyed a more productive history from the late 1950s until now, that today we would be able to boast of more substantive accomplishments" (2002, 250).

In fact, one of the most distinguishing features of Chafe's career was his role as a kind of linguistics pariah, never engaging in the "trendy" discussions of the day, never being part of the mainstream, "forever working on the margins of the discipline" (2002, 249). He confessed that "I think I know what it was like to be an atheist in medieval Europe" (2002, 249). It is tempting to picture him in the manner of an anti-hero so typical for Western films: not a bandit, but not welcomed or well-liked by the townsfolk either, yet always being the one to "save the day," so to speak. Of course, in Chafe's case, the analogy stops there, as the people who knew or met him personally describe him as a kind man, warm friend, and brilliant mentor.

Most of Chafe's research post-1970 was informed by his firm belief that linguistic inquiry can only be successful if it views its subject matter through consciousness, which in turn may be better understood by studying real-life ordinary

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<sup>1</sup> I always smile to myself when I recall Chafe's subtle jab at the frequency with which examples from Virginia Woolf appear in studies devoted to displaced experience by saying: "Finally, I will break sharply with tradition by failing to cite even one example from Virginia Woolf" (1994, 196).

linguistic data, especially its spoken variety. He admired the work of the American psychologist William James (see Chafe 2000), whose contributions were for a while disregarded when the discipline turned away from the study of the mind to positivist philosophy embodied in behaviorism.

Chafe's 1994 monograph is a culmination of more than twenty years of research which started as tacit suggestions about the role of consciousness in the production and reception of language (e.g., 1973, 1974). In the twenty years, Chafe refined his observations, supplied them with enough data taken, for example, from his Pear Stories project (1980), and framed his arguments as a coherent set (I will refrain here from using the words "theory" or "theoretical framework", as Chafe himself was quite opposed to them). The result was a picture of language which sees its structure being determined not only by the pragmatic-functional aspects of communication, but also importantly by the flow and displacement of the stream of thought. Chafe in fact suggested that language and consciousness are so intertwined that the former displays the same constant properties as the latter – and is in fact an extension of it. Language, then, just as consciousness, has focus, which is limited in its scope and which is embedded in a broader peripheral consciousness, it is dynamic, it has a point of view and a need for orientation (1994, 26–30).

According to Chafe, the limited scope of the focus of consciousness is expressed linguistically in the *intonation unit*, which also forms a single complete unit of information. Such an intonation unit (of information) is characterized by its relative brevity – Chafe suggested the modal length of four words to be the size of one intonation unit in English – and by containing a single intonational and informational prominence (1994, 53–70, 108–19). Such intonation/information units may combine to form larger units of information, which however are more complex and depend to a large extent on peripheral, rather than focal, consciousness (137–45).

The focus and periphery of consciousness, together with all the things a mind is not currently conscious of, are the basis for three states a piece of information may be in in our minds (1994, 53–4). An information may be either *active* (you are currently thinking of it; it is in focus), *semi-active* (it is "in the air," the periphery of consciousness – and may likely be activated soon), or *inactive* (it lies outside of the focus and periphery, dormant). The dynamic quality of consciousness then invokes James's stream of thought, the fact that ideas in our minds ebb and flow, and as they rapidly replace one another, their activation states fluctuate.

According to Chafe language reflects the activation states of ideas in the following manner: at any moment in time, information stored in the speaker's memory

will be either active, semi-active, or inactive. Then the speaker decides to communicate some of their thoughts to the listener. As they prepare for the act of communication, the speaker activates all the ideas that are part of the utterance. At this point, they are fully focused on what they are going to say.

Since, as Chafe suggests, an act of communication is nothing more than a means of providing indirect access to one's mind, the task of the speaker is to ensure that the channel providing the access is clear enough that the resultant picture in the listener's mind of the referents/participants, events, and states (i.e., ideas; 1994, 66–7) described will be as faithful as possible to the original image in the speaker's mind. In other words, the ideas communicated should not be distorted during the transfer. Inevitably, there will be some degree of distortion, as the link achieved by language is imperfect, but the choice of appropriate linguistic forms will eliminate most of it, while the choice of inappropriate ones will cause the communication to break down.

In terms of *activation cost*, a term introduced by Chafe, the speaker's goal is to activate the communicated ideas in the mind of the listener. By the end of the utterance (if successful), all the ideas will be in focus in the listener's mind. The level of success depends to a large degree on the speaker's choice of appropriate linguistic forms and structures. This choice reflects the speaker's understanding that some of the ideas they are trying to communicate will already be in focus (i.e., activated) in the listener's mind (before the utterance takes place, that is) and that therefore they do not have to expend unnecessary energy – cost – in their activation. In fact, their only responsibility with respect to such ideas is to *keep* them active. Other ideas will be in the periphery (i.e., semi-active) in the listener's mind and will be more 'costly' to activate, and finally, some ideas will be completely inactive and will require the greatest amount of linguistic effort to be brought into the listener's focus.

From the listener's perspective, the linguistic forms and structures used by the speaker signal from which area of their mind they should retrieve the necessary information. If an idea is presented as *given*, with a pronoun, for instance, the listener will know it to be something that they are already thinking about, something that they have in focus. An idea may be active/in focus due to several factors, such as recent mention or the presence of its referent in the physical environment of the interlocution. If an idea is presented as *new*, the listener will know that what is being communicated is either completely new (as is frequently the case in teacher-student interactions) to them, or is discourse new (i.e., something that the listener has stored in their memory but is not currently thinking of it). In both situations, the listener will require substantially more information to correctly identify the idea with something stored in their memory or to integrate it into their mind, and for that

reason new ideas are most often expressed with full noun phrases. In the case of the completely new pieces of information, indefinite noun phrases are used. Finally, a semi-active idea is one which, while the listener is not focused on it precisely, is related in some way to the topic at hand. For that reason, it may be judged by the speaker to be *accessible* to the listener. Unfortunately, as Chafe showed, accessible ideas cannot easily be distinguished from new ideas in terms of the form they are expressed by, and one needs to resort to other means of identification, such as their frequency of occurrence in a text. Nevertheless, Chafe did convincingly show that there is room and reason for accessible ideas in linguistic description (for more details see 1994, 82–92).

Not surprisingly, the interaction between the mind of the speaker and the mind of the listener through language is not always entirely successful, giving rise to frequent misunderstandings.

The remaining two properties of consciousness do not play such a central role in Chafe's writings. That consciousness requires a point of view is to suggest that consciousness needs an anchor to which it can tie experiences, and that this anchor is frequently the self. In other words, people prefer to talk about the world from their own unique perspective and often prefer to talk about experiences in which they themselves were involved (Chafe 1976, 54). Point of view is linguistically expressed in the choice of the grammatical person, it typically being the first person (singular and plural) and in that the grammatical subjects most often coincide with the experiencing self and usually occur at the beginning of an utterance. Finally, the need of a consciousness to be oriented is nothing more than its need to know where, when, with whom and in what kind of activity or situation it is located (1994, 128–9).

As much of his research since the late 1960s represented a unique manner of tackling the problems of information structure, it can hardly be surprising that it brought him in proximity to the functionalist approach formulated by the members of the Prague Linguistic Circle, especially Jan Firbas. Chafe recognized the important role played by Czech linguists in pioneering extensive research into information structure as early as 1970 in his *Meaning and the Structure of Language*. From this monograph onwards, one can trace a curious development of Chafe's awareness of the theory of functional sentence perspective in his publications.

In *Meaning and the Structure of Language*, Chafe acknowledged the contributions made by the members of the Prague Linguistic Circle in no more than a footnote (210). Later, perhaps as his own acquaintance with and understanding of the Firbasian approach grew, Chafe engaged in a more extensive polemic with the theory,

first disagreeing on whether the given-new distinction is merely a binary opposition, as he suggested at the time, or whether it includes an entire gamut of degrees of information states, as suggested by Firbas (Chafe 1974, 119–20, 1976, 33). According to Chafe, the idea of a gamut of information states is implausible when one takes consciousness into account.<sup>2</sup> By 1994, Chafe had already been forced to conclude that information must be stored in our brains in three distinct states, thus breaking from his earlier conviction of a binary system and so symbolically taking a step towards the theory of FSP. While still having some reservations, especially with respect to the fact that Firbas and others had continued to ignore the role of consciousness in their writings, Chafe was able to find many points of agreement between his research and that of the FSP scholars, a tradition of mutual respect that was continued by Chamonikolasová (2000, 2007) and that culminated in Chafe's contribution to the 2008 issue of *Brno Studies in English*.

It is telling that late in his career, Chafe devoted much attention to not only linguistic, but also to paralinguistic, phenomena, such as laughter and the verbal and non-verbal expression of emotions in general, and to means of communication that are only distantly related to language, such as music (1994, 186–91). Quite naturally, he explored these phenomena from a cognitive viewpoint, trying to understand how they relate to the stream of consciousness and how they may be better understood through it. At every turn, Chafe stood out as a polymath and a scholar who was able to combine his broad array of interests in unexpected, yet coherent, ways. And with focus on such issues as laughter and language (see e.g., Chafe 2007), he once again proved to be a man forever searching for answers along the borders of linguistic knowledge, perhaps not being in the vanguard of modern linguistic research, but certainly opening new, surprising frontiers.

Wallace Chafe was never entirely content within the limits of mainstream linguistics. He shunned armchair Bloomfieldian structuralism in favor of researching Native American languages in the field. At the time when dozens of linguists became enamored with generativism, Chafe remained skeptical of it. And as dissatisfied generativists were formulating the fundamentals of generative semantics, Chafe worked out his own unique approach to the problem of semantics and deep structure. Finally, when generative semantics gave rise to mainstream cognitive

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<sup>2</sup> It is to be noted that at the time Chafe probably misunderstood Firbas's concept of communicative dynamism and thought of it as relating to the same issues of information structure as the given-new distinction. While communicative dynamism certainly does incorporate this binary opposition, it also includes considerations of dynamic semantics and linearity, as pointed out by Firbas in his response to Chafe (1987; see also Firbas 1992).

linguistics, Chafe, once again, walked his own path and formulated a separate vision of language and cognition, trusting above all his own instincts as a linguist and as a human being. Wallace Chafe was, and will remain, a symbol of what may be achieved if one is able to break away from the trends of the day and think about language – or any other subject, for that matter – in original, groundbreaking ways.

Allow me to conclude with a sentiment, one that hopefully truthfully reflects Chafe's unshakeable belief in the importance of the study of consciousness and language: If the mind is a universe of its own, as vast and as intricate as the physical Universe, then understanding language as a mirror and extension of the mind may be as important as realizing the background microwave radiation is a mirror and a telescope to the Big Bang and the early days of the Universe.

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Firbas, Jan. *Functional Sentence Perspective in Written and Spoken Communication*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

### Positions held by Wallace Chafe

1958–1959 Buffalo

1959–1962 Smithsonian Institution, Bureau of American Ethnology

1962–2019 Berkeley UC Santa Barbara, Department of Linguistics

- 1969–1974 and 1977–1978: department chair

- 1975–1986: director of the Survey of California and Other Indian Languages

- 1991–2019 (after retirement): Research professor

### Selected Publications of Wallace Chafe

#### 1. Seneca

1959. “Internal Reconstruction in Seneca.” *Language* 35: 477–95.

1967. *Seneca Morphology and Dictionary*. Smithsonian Contributions to Anthropology 4. Washington: Smithsonian Press.

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## 2. Caddo and Other Native American Languages

1964. "Another Look at Siouan and Iroquoian." *American Anthropologist* 66: 852–62.

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## 3. General Language

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