Al-Manfaluti preceded Chomsky in discovering the Innateness Hypothesis

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Chomsky’s Linguistic theory, and the interpretations and comments made upon it, is almost a highly active dimension in the study of Linguistics as well as the nature of human cognitive abilities in most countries of the world. In this article, some light will be shed on some of the ideas advocated by Chomsky and his commentators as expressed about forty years before Chomsky in one of the literary works of an Egyptian writer, namely, Mustafa Lutfi Al-Manfaluti who was born in 1876 and died in 1925.

According to Chomsky, all the knowledge and principles of all possible human languages are imbedded in the human mind. The new born babe is fully capable of processing any human language and following precisely its grammar, however, all the child needs is the spark of hearing one of these languages according to which it will formulate its own grammar. In other words language , along with most other human abilities, depends upon “ genetically programmed mental structures”. (Gliedman, 199?) Moreover, Chomsky goes as far as suggesting that even death is genetically programmed , “ you may be genetically programmed to die at roughly a certain point; it is a reasonable theory”. (Gliedman .) He introduced the term “universal grammar” to mean “ the sum total of all the immutable principles that heredity builds into the language organ. These principles cover grammar, speech sounds, and meaning. Put differently, universal grammar is the inherited genetic endowment that makes it possible for us to speak and learn human languages”. (Gliedman) Universal grammar is therefore part of the knowledge that resides in the mind of a person who knows a language.

For language acquisition, Chomsky suggests that the child approaches the task of acquiring a language with a rich conceptual framework already in place and also with a rich system of assumptions about sound structure and the structures of complex utterances. As Chomsky summarizes this ,“ Language is not really something the child does; it is something that happens to the child”. For adult teaching, the innateness hypothesis is still active; as Chomsky believes that “ the truth
of the matter is that about 99% of teaching is making the students feel interested in the material. Then the other 1% has to do with your methods, and that’s not just true of language, it is true of every subject”. (Albert, 2002: 4)

Chomsky’s innateness hypothesis is further applied to realms other than Linguistics. He extrapolates this hypothesis to science, aesthetics, all concepts and morality. As for science, people have long been discussing what scientists really do when they do science. For, Chomsky this is done because it is part of the human “biological endowments”; scientists are endowed with a certain conceptual apparatus that enables them to formulate hypotheses and make conclusions. For aesthetics, he formulates his views as follows; “Work of true value follows canons and principles that are only in part subject to human choice; in part, they reflect our fundamental nature. The result is that we can experience deep emotion – pleasure, pain, excitement, and so on- from certain creative work, though how and why remains largely unknown.” For concepts, he claims that children have all the concepts in mind beforehand, they just need to listen to the sounds that go with each concept according to different languages, and then they will use the concept with its new label with amazing facility. The speed and precision of vocabulary acquisition, as Chomsky states “leaves no real alternative to the conclusion that the child somehow has the concepts available before experience with language and is basically learning labels for concepts that are already a part of his or her conceptual apparatus”. For morals, he still follows the same line of thought; he claims that there is limited evidence growing up in society, the child acquires standards and principles of moral judgment.

I think that it can, therefore, be safely concluded that the innateness hypothesis in Chomsky’s theory states all knowledge of language, morals, concepts, and shared human aesthetics is latent in the mind of all human beings, it just needs the spark of a certain society, language, or label to get to work. It may be astonishing then to learn that most of these ideas were presented and elaborated in the writings of one late Egyptian literary writer who was known for his deep thought and meditations unto the human nature and the universe.

Mustafa Lutfi Al Manfaluti was born in the south of Egypt in 1876 to religious parents who cared much about their child’s religious education. He studied in AL
Azhar and had bond relationships with Imam Mohammad Abdo, and Saad Zaghlol. He worked in the government while Zaghlol was the Minister of Education, and after that when he became the Minister of Justice. Al Manfaluti was known for his elegant style in prose writing, a thing that is always compared to the achievements of Al Barody in reviving Arabic poetry. Of his writings, Al Abarat (the Tears), Al Nazarat (the Meditations), and AL Kalimat (the Words) are the most celebrated.

In an article entitled (the Learned and the Unlearned) published in 1910, in (AL Nazarat), Al Manfaluti presents his ideas about the innateness hypothesis. He says:

“Any one who thinks about things- in general- will find that the universally true meanings, the global questions of good and evil, benefit and harm, and the human speculations about the concrete as well as the spiritual life, will find that these are commonly shared by all people, the layman just as the highly educated, the well-off just as the destitute, and those who were raised in universities and those who were exposed to nature. This is because science is a stream that fountains from the inside, not a flood that runs from the outside, and because all knowledge is latent in minds like the latency of fire in the gun, and the power in the mass. The only function of teaching then is just to arouse this knowledge and revive it. (Al Manfaluti, 1980: 286)

In this extract, Al Manfaluti clearly states what Chomsky has stated nearly forty years or more later. Al Manfaluti makes it quite clear that all types of humans share innate knowledge about the nature of knowledge and the meanings of concepts. In order to explain this idea further, he gives the following example:

“The proof for this is that, through deep observation, there is no one piece of wisdom, that learned people are proud of thinking that it is the summit of their knowledge and the top of their superiority, that is not found, even closely, on the tongues of the public in the form of an anecdote, a proverb, or the like. Also, there is no one moral standard or ethical case that is considered amongst the masterpieces of old books, that is not easily handled and approached by all common people even the most inferior and the illiterate of them. (p. 286)

The language of Al Manfaluti should be looked upon from the point of view of classical Arabic prose that was revived at the beginnings of the last century. It is a
language that is full of similes and metaphors, and it overuses long sentences to explain one obvious truth. This was the suitable language for the people of that age. In the previous example, Al Manfaluti gives two examples of wisdom and moral issues and states that these are common for all types of humans, simply because these are “pre-programmed”, and because this knowledge is “built-in”.

He, moreover, reaches a final conclusion that the only difference between the learned and the unlearned is that the latter are unable to express this knowledge in a systematic way, and had they had this “Bayan” (systematic expression), they wouldn’t have heard any outstanding meanings from the learned. Al Manfaluti reaches his final analysis by giving a wonderful remark about the nature of humans; “Do not think that the joy that we see made by common people when they listen to the words of knowledgeable people, is just made because the former knew what they didn’t know before, or recognized what they never encountered! Nay, it because they have found those who can translate their ideas and encapsulate their meanings that are segmented in their minds, and because they found in themselves the joy of having a similarity and familiarity with their own ideas and views.” (p. 287)

In this extract, it quite clear that it is not the question of new knowledge, it is rather expression and recognition of the subject matter and similarity of ideas. These are the ideas of the late Egyptian writer who was described in the “History of Arabic Literature” as “a musical piece from the inside and the outside. He had harmonic morals, appreciative sense, organized thought, straightforward style and suitable clothing. He had a heart that was so kind, a creed that was so solid, a hand that was so generous, and all his mind, money and love were devoted to his family, nationality and humanity” (Al Zayat, 1970:6)

Isn’t it amazing that the worldly celebrated ideas of Chomsky are just as clear and straightforward as were those of Al Manfaluti who didn’t study Linguistics in the modern sense? Can this be another proof of Chomsky’s theory that people knew every thing by virtue of being pre-programmed humans, and encountered every truth even the truth of his own theory? Will we then reach more truths about human nature if we just follow the example of Al Manfaluti’s meditations? Should we pass through some stages of purification, as in the described qualities of Al Manfaluti, that will render us
fit for the discovery of new truths about human nature and the universe? Finally should we give the credit to the ideas of a late Egyptian prose writer who prophesied the ideas of the future and who reached the heart of the truth by simple naive meditations?

References

Appendix : Original Arabic Texts.