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218. On the origins and early developments of Chomskyan linguistics: The rise and fall of the standard model

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1. Introduction

At the heart of Chomskyan linguistics is a research program called generative grammar. Generative grammar originated in work done by Noam Chomsky (b. 1928) during a research fellowship at Harvard University in the early 1950s. By the end of the 20th century, generative grammar had followers all over the world, and Chomsky had become one of the most cited living researchers (v. Otero 1994: I.xxii). While transformational analysis actually originated at the University of Pennsylvania with Chomsky's advisor, Zellig Harris, generative grammar has always been closely associated with Chomsky, his students and the university where Chomsky has taught, the Massachusetts Institute of Technology (MIT). From its inception, generative grammar has remained a fast-moving, controversial research effort, characterized by a largely invariant core of metaphysical and methodological principles, but with fre-

quent modifications in its implementation details. This article briefly traces the development of the 'standard model' of generative grammar from its origins in the 1950s through its decline in the early 1970s.

2. Language as a rule-governed system

One central claim of Chomskyan linguistics is that natural language can be described as a regular, rule-governed system whose combinatory characteristics can be discovered and studied. This was a bold claim to make in the 1950s, when the syntax of natural languages, like many other aspects of human knowledge and behavior, was commonly believed to be too irregular to be susceptible to rigorous treatment. Yet the claim was not entirely novel, as one finds precedent in structural linguistics, which emphasized making theories as compact and explicit as possible. Louis Hjelmslev (1899–1965), for example, suggested that linguistics, as one of the sciences, must seek a "general and exhaustive calculus" of its subject matter (1961 [1943]: 9), both *arbitrary* and *appropriate*. A few years later, Zellig Harris (1909–1992) wrote that linguistic analysis should include a "deductive system with axiomatically defined initial