

DOWNLOAD PDF THE POWER OF BABEL A NATURAL HISTORY OF LANGUAGE

Chapter 1 : [PDF] The Power Of Babel A Natural History Of Language Download eBook for Free

The book, labeled a natural history of language, discusses how all languages come from a shared root language, how those languages branched into the many languages we know today, and how languages come to die.

The Power of Babel: Once, "the whole earth was of one language". Its monoglot speakers projected "a tower, whose top may reach unto heaven"; God, seeing that "nothing will be restrained from them", shattered that language into a multitude of mutually incomprehensible ways of speech. The builders left off their proud construction; "Therefore is the name of it called Babel. For John McWhorter, Babel is more like the name of a life force. He simply loves the variety and flux of particular languages, and his book is an example-rich, sometimes anecdotal tribute. The breathless tour of linguistic oddities from around the globe has its own empirical delight. We find the languages of "primitive" peoples with ineffably complex grammatical rules, and are shown languages happily doing without any of the features that we might think vital to communication. There are languages of New Guinea that have no tenses; Australian languages with only three verbs. McWhorter is a kind of linguistic David Attenborough, observing with an awed enthusiasm all the strange varieties and ingenious adaptations of the 6, or so human languages supposedly being spoken on the planet at this moment. The fascination is in his detail, the sheer case-by-case weirdness of languages. Anyone who has sweated over Latin or Ancient Greek in school will have had a much easier time than if certain North American indigenous languages, with their dizzying inflections, had been set for GCSEs. Everywhere language grows into curlicues of complication. There are the impossibly unpredictable plurals of the Luo language of Kenya, and the pedantic "evidential markers" of Tuyuca spoken in the Amazon rainforest a statement has to be accompanied by a grammatical indication as to how one came by the information. Where there are not inflections, there are almost unlearnable sound-markers of grammatical function: He particularly relishes the phenomenon that most nettles linguistic opinionists: We usually see only the smallest hints of great, slow changes that are happening all the time. We hear the rise of slang, and sometimes its transformation into a standard part of the language. Occasionally we detect some grammatical element that is dying to groans from the punctilious or being born. Yet these are tiny things when measured against the continental shifts in language that happen over stretches longer than any single lifetime. Palaeontologists have fossils; linguists have creoles. Unlike life-forms, new languages are, now and then, "created". First of all, "pidgin" versions of languages are developed when new speakers need to reduce a language to its most basic elements. A creole is what happens when a pidgin starts coming to life, developing its own inflections. English "crushed to powder" and reborn according to Melanesian grammatical habits. Knowing that self-transformation is a "natural" condition for speech, professors of linguistics always find it easy to condescend to those who fret about language change. He talks frequently of the "evolution" of languages, but sometimes seems uncertain about this metaphor. On the one hand, all the incredibly various languages of the world are taken to have evolved from a single progenitor. There was, probably , years ago, an Ur-language, some of whose characteristics linguists can guess at. Out of it grew everything. On the other hand, languages do not necessarily change from the simple to the more complex. Is French a more "developed" language than the Latin from which it grew? McWhorter reveals himself through his own ways with language, which one could call "Californian": This might seem like proselytising enthusiasm, but it is something more. Language, for him, lives in speech - that brief "mouthful of air", as Anthony Burgess called it. He is altogether less keen on the language as it is written, with its stern conventions and its distance from mere utterance. So when he quotes approvingly, it is invariably from TV or popular song. Author he may be, but he wants to be chatting rather than writing. Writing, and particularly printing, are what change the evolutionary patterns that McWhorter finds himself calling "natural" to language. Literacy involves standardisation and the written language resists change, where speech rushes to meet it. English changes more slowly than it used to. We can understand the language of Shakespeare, who wrote some years ago, but he would have found the Old English

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of years earlier a foreign language. With widespread literacy come prescriptions that radically slow change. Everything to do with correctness irks McWhorter, as it irked Pinker. Linguists know, of course, that common "errors" or infelicities are invariably uses of language that simply obey different codes from the "standard". Yet, as they unravel the strange structures of languages, we should notice what linguists cannot tell us about. They have nothing to say about eloquence, wit, beauty, expressiveness, or any number of the special qualities of speech and writing. Near the end of his book, McWhorter permits himself a grumble against the predominance in academic life of Chomskyan linguists Pinker is one dedicated to "illuminating the possibility that we possess a neural mechanism calibrated to produce basic sentences". McWhorter will, he tells us, document one of them as soon as his book is finished; whether with sadness or with delight, it is hard to say. He is writing a book about anonymity for Faber.

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John McWhorter's The Power of Babel fits precisely into this definition of a good book. McWhorter's main argument is that languages have been in a constant evolutionary flux since the first humans began speaking approximately , years ago.

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There are approximately six thousand languages on Earth today, each a descendant of the tongue first spoken by Homo sapiens some , years ago. While laying out how languages mix and mutate over time, linguistics professor John McWhorter reminds us of the variety within the species that speaks them, and argues that, contrary to popular perception, language is not immutable and hidebound.

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Full of humor and imaginative insight, The Power of Babel draws its illustrative examples from languages around the world, including pidgins, Creoles, and nonstandard dialects. "synopsis" may belong to another edition of this title.