

The Power Of Babel: A Natural History Of Language



Synopsis

There are approximately six thousand languages on Earth today, each a descendant of the tongue first spoken by Homo sapiens some 150,000 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, but a living, dynamic entity that adapts itself to an ever-changing human environment. 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.

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Customer Reviews

Starting with the well-known model of relationships among languages as a family tree, McWhorter (linguistics, Berkeley) fleshes out and refines this model as he narrates development of language. He explores five main ways that languages change, such as sound change and the transformation of words into pieces of grammar. McWhorter further illuminates and compares concepts of dialect, pidgin, and Creole to demonstrate the changing nature of language. Through the discussion, he replaces the family-tree model of language relations with the more sophisticated images of a bush and a net. Numerous examples support each point, including cartoons illustrating German dialects. Indeed, the sheer weight of all the examples and detailed discussion could discourage an initially curious reader. While McWhorter reaches out to general readers by avoiding jargon and using an informal tone, brevity is needed to reach the maximum audience. Steven Fisher offers a narrative language history in *History of Language* (Reaktion, 1999), but while Fisher presents a slightly briefer

account, it is also far more technical, with an emphasis on evolutionary theory. Not an essential purchase, McWhorter's work is recommended only for public libraries with large language collections. Marianne Orme, Des Plaines P.L., IL Copyright 2001 Reed Business Information, Inc. --This text refers to an out of print or unavailable edition of this title.

This book is not for those uncomfortable with change. McWhorter's main goal is to convey to laypeople what linguists know about the inexorable changeability of languages. He compares our popular understanding of language to Monopoly instructions--static and written as though "from on high." But whereas Parkers Brothers is not likely to revise the rules of its game, language is as transitory as a cloud formation. From this analogy, aided by parallels with natural evolution, McWhorter shows us how the world's many dialects arose from a single Ur-tongue. He emphasizes the idea that "dialect is all there is." What we call a "standard language" is in fact a dialect that has been anointed by people in power and by cultural circumstances. All this becomes a tad academic in places, but McWhorter's use of analogies, anecdotes, and popular culture keeps the discussion lively. A worthy contribution to our understanding of the defining feature of human life. Philip HerbstCopyright © American Library Association. All rights reserved --This text refers to an out of print or unavailable edition of this title.

The book presents an explanation of a very fascinating topic: how human languages change over time. When you consider that French, Spanish and Italian all started as dialects of the same language, you know something interesting underlies language evolution. The book is thorough, interesting and requires no prior knowledge of linguistics. While I enjoyed the book, I have two negative issues: first, the book is repetitive, repetitive, repetitive. The same points over and over again when it just wasn't necessary because the concepts are not that difficult. In addition, some of the examples used to were too detailed and too lengthy for the book's intended audience. The second thing that I found a little annoying about the book is that it is filled with footnotes and asides that I'm sure the author meant to be entertaining, but they frequently came across as glib and self serving. It was as if the author was imitating David Foster Wallace - but the author is not David Foster Wallace. All in all, it's a good book and worth reading, but if you stop reading after chapter 4 (about half way) you won't miss much.

While my view and review of this book is overall negative, I don't want to take away from the very obvious intelligence of the author. One can easily tell he is very smart and passionate about this

subject. Unfortunately, I also think that this detracts from what could have been a better book. As others have noted, the book lacks focus and direction, and seems more to be more of the author presenting what he has learned. I don't think he did enough analysis to really break it down into something useful - or as my bosses and teachers would say "what is the 'so what'". This lack of focus also causes the book to drone on and for the author to take forever making a point (or making it over and over). As in "ok, so such thing as a language or standard language, I got it, lets move on." Again, there is a LOT of information and cool facts and observations in this book, but the lack of real effort and focus make it a mediocre effort at best. And that is a shame, because I think it had a lot more potential. I also think that based on the title and description of the book which were no doubt written by someone at the publishing company who knows how to condense ideas and thoughts effectively. Some others have complained about the author's use of pop culture terms and references such as the Simpsons, and while I see their point, it also didn't bother me too much. There were some that I didn't get, and occasionally I realized that even those I did weren't adding anything, but I don't think they took anything away, either. Some have also complained about using SO many different languages as examples and why he couldn't just pick something easier.. well, I think for a lot of the concepts, it would have been impossible. English, for example, doesn't have many conventions used in other languages, so he would've limited himself too much. I do, agree, however that he could have been more concise about the examples and more targeted in their use. I often found myself skimming over all those parts and unfortunately because of his writing, he wasn't clear about what exactly I should have gleaned from those examples. So, overall, I don't think it's as bad as some make it out to be, but it's also not good. At the very least it has a lot of material and a lot of potential and so if you want to get more out of it, you can, but that extra work for the reader means it can't be rated above 3 stars. Hopefully this helps.

Another great book by my favorite writer on linguistics and race relations. Not quite as good as *Our Magnificent Bastard Tongue*, it is nevertheless typical McWhorter - fast moving, clear, well developed and insightful. There is an embarrassment of riches here, but I would say among the main themes are how languages develop and change, that all languages are really dialects, the differences between pidgins and creoles and in the epilogue, that we cannot trace back to the original language through linguistic reconstructions. To steal a word from Homer which has little changed in meaning (and which I think the author would appreciate) - kudos!

My first exposure to John McWhorter was in the Great Courses DVD lecture series he does on

Linguistics, called *The Story of Human Language*, and it was absolutely fascinating, although his voice is more than a bit oversoothing and can easily put you to sleep, and only his lively and expressive personality counters that effect. This book seems to me to be very much the book form of that lecture series, and for that it is definitely worth the purchase. McWhorter's writing style is very informal and conversational when it needs to be, and very analytical and formal when it also needs to be. He does not disappoint with this or any of his other books.

If you wonder where language began, why there are different languages, why some languages take over, others merge and meld, and still others just die, this is the book for you. There's no question that some of the material is difficult and dense, but patience and persistence pay off. Just when you think you can't absorb any more, the author comes up with an interesting and amusing anecdote that gives your poor brain a rest. The book is best taken in small bites, but don't give up. It's really worth it, and the author makes what could be deadly dull into a book that you will want to finish.

Good book for beginning linguists-- and this book is written in a conversational style that makes it far less dry than you'd expect. Definitely worth the money if you're interested in linguistics.

I had to buy this book for a class. It primarily for uses on information regarding the usage and development of language. I did not find it to be a particularly entertaining read, but if linguistics are an area of personal interest for you, the author's style is pleasant and he provides some novel information. It was helpful for my class and was easy to navigate to find the indentation that I needed for various assignments.

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