

JOHN H. MCWHORTER. **The Power of Babel: A Natural History of Language**. 2001. New York: Times Books/Henry Holt. Pp. 327

This book is not an esoteric volume for stuffy scholars. In fact, it addresses the person on the street with a curious mind. However, approaching it from the newly acquired heights of a Masters Linguistics student, it is anything but dull and does offer new data and perspective even to the jaded. The book is divided into seven chapters, bookended by an introduction and an epilogue.

Anthropology tells us the original homo sapiens roamed East Africa some 150,000 years ago, and from there, spread to other lands. These seminal people who evolved from higher primates were equipped with language ability. The question is what exactly did they speak, the quixotic quest for this work.

In the first chapter, we see how the one original tongue morphed into the six thousand current ones, the widely accepted approximate number of estimated languages spoken today. Throughout the book, M reminds us how difficult it is to separate a language from a dialect, with shades of difference due to political or psychological factors, and many clusters moving on a cline from mutually intelligible variants to completely separate languages at the two poles. He explains the various kinds of changes which affect languages, semantic shift, and sound and grammatical developments which follow predictable patterns.

Each major, or minor, language is in turn divided into various dialects, due to regional or sociological variances. In fact, the standard is arbitrary at best, and the true language represents a combination of various isolects and diglossias. We are reminded how language change is gradual and often imperceptible within one's lifetime, even though each angst-ridden teen wave coins its own new vocabulary, much of it rather volatile. However, centuries and then millennia must elapse before Latin becomes Romance languages, and in turn Romance language speakers can no

longer understand the Vulgate dialects of yesteryear or each other, as any English speaker attempting to read Old English 'Beowulf' well knows, with even Chaucer and Shakespeare offering some difficulties.

As nomadic hunter gatherer peoples settled down to land-intensive agriculture, came the need for conquest, and eventually colonial imperialism which led to the dominance of megalanguages and the absorption of substrates and indigenous families. Most of the world's people speak one of twenty or so languages, although many are bilingual in one or more minority ones also. If today's languages number merely 6,000, world languages followed a Bell curve with a bulge in feudal societies with isolation contributing to the growth of new varieties.

One of the areas which interest M is Creoles and the topic is central to the opus. He analyzes the contact circumstances which give rise to stripped down pidgins as working languages, often eventually developing into full fledged Creoles as the need arises. There are various kinds and degrees of creolization, with vocabulary calqued on the ethnic language of origin a common type. Creoles develop new grammars in a remarkably consistent way, giving weight to M's hypothesis that the first language probably had a similar structure to Creoles. Indeed, most developed languages have baroque bells and whistles with exceptional cases which make them difficult to master, especially for the non-native learner. Most languages could get by even without tenses with context and specific time adverbs as markers of past, present or future when the concept is relevant. What M does not address is any comparison between preschoolers' early grammatical forms compared to Creoles. Of course, each toddler is already conditioned to its ambient grammatical idiosyncrasies, but there are well-known children errors which follow certain basic patterns, such as SVO, a feature shared with Creoles as the unmarked 'default'.

M brings humor to his book, with copious references to my favorite French comic book character, Asterix, and its 'Mundart' translations in German dialects to illustrate variants within one major language. He answers a question I had pondered: why do cartoons so often feature humanized animals? His answer, Disney's Mickey Mouse, with his white gloves, set the standard, and all studios followed suit. He brings this analogy to language, the reason Indo-European languages share many features. He debunks the double negative stigma by pointing out the feature is alive and well in Romance languages, except in French where the new negative is a non-negative grammaticalized emphasizer, although occasionally accepting a triple negative: "Je n'ai jamais vu personne." Along the way, he explains many esoteric features from the world's various languages, with references to popular TV shows as well as his beloved lap cat.

If languages continually evolve from the original protolanguage, they also die, often silently undocumented, the linguists' ultimate tragedy, but rarely resurrect, although the case of Hebrew is the one exception which confirms the rule with special political and religious circumstances fostering this one and only success story, along with more modest efforts of Irish or Hawaiian and their afferent mixed results.

Finally, M attacks Greenberg and Ruhlen's Ur-language basic vocabulary theory of twenty or so reconstructable protoforms with the reminder that languages change too much to remotely hypothesize on forms so far removed in time, particularly the unstable vowel inventories, using the image of lava lamps constantly morphing, a vivid visual comparison recurring through the entire work as a unifying theme.

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