



All About Language

BY ANDREW BENEDICT-NELSON

LANGUAGE, FROM THE MANY FLAVORS of vocabulary to the generative machine of grammar, enables people to express an infinite number of thoughts. Writers have found as nearly as many ways to explore the subject of language in nonfiction. From the highly theoretical to the fun and the frivolous, here are books that tell the story of the tools we use to speak, write, and think.

LANGUAGE THEORY

Linguistics may sound like a dry field, but the ways in which we make sense of language have been the subject of intense debate throughout human history. That's because language is tied to fundamental philosophical questions: just try addressing the question, "How do I know that I'm really thinking what I'm thinking?" without thinking about how you're thinking in words.

The main divide among linguists today is between those who view language as an innate capacity of human beings (a position identified with Noam Chomsky and his "universal grammar") and those who primarily view language as a creation of human culture. Few of the academic works espousing these views will interest the average reader, but accessible and entertaining writers have taken up the subject from both points of view. For the "innate" view, check out Steven Pinker's *The Language Instinct: How the Mind Creates Language* (1994). Pinker is a neuroscientist who takes delight in showing the ways in which language interacts with the brain.

Those more interested in the cultural side of the question may enjoy *Language: The Cultural Tool* by linguist Daniel Everett (2012). Everett spent many years studying the lan-

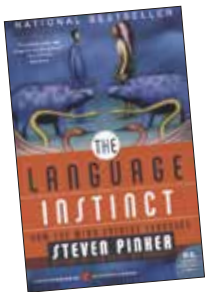
guage of a tribe in the Amazon, but his book also borrows insights from fields such as anthropology, computer science, and primatology.

THE GENEALOGY OF LANGUAGE

For many years, the formal study of language was concerned with the origins of words and how today's languages grew out of ancient ones. It is through this painstaking philological work that we know that most European and Indian languages come from the same source, for example. But it's almost impossible to predict how languages will grow and change in the future. This story is the subject of *Empires of the Word: A Language History of the World* by Nicholas Ostler (2005). Ostler treats the story of each language as its own historical riddle. Why has Chinese remained so stable despite centuries of conquest and revolution? Why did the conquests of imperial Rome aid the spread of Koiné ("common") Greek as well as Latin? What role do nationhood, commerce, and religion play in a language's adoption throughout the world? Ostler takes on all these questions in a volume that will also scratch the itch of any world history buff. See also Ostler's *The Last Lingua Franca: English Until the Return of Babel* (2010).

THE ENGLISH LANGUAGE

Plenty of writers have taken on the history of the English language. Perhaps the most novel approach is David Crystal's *The Story of English in 100 Words* (2011). From the oldest identifiably English word ("roe") to new coinages like "unfriend" and "chillax," Crystal uses each of his chosen 100 words to explore a different issue in the history of the language. Highlights include names turned into everyday nouns ("valentine"), words introduced by the King James



Bible (“shibboleth”), and words invented in far-flung English-speaking territories like the United States (“skunk”), Australia (“dinkum”), and India (“lakh”).

Readers who wish to explore any of these issues in greater detail can pick up more than a dozen other books on the subject written by Crystal, most notably *The Stories of English* (2004). The title is plural because English has been influenced by so many different languages and cultures. John McWhorter makes a more specific argument along the same lines in *Our Magnificent Bastard Tongue: The Untold Story of English* (2008), where he claims that Celtic languages played a greater role in English language development than previously thought.

Tired of the “mother tongue”? Check out the work of husband-and-wife team Jean-Benoît Nadeau and Julie Barlow, authors of *The Story of Spanish* (2013) and *The Story of French* (2002).

THE DEATH OF LANGUAGES

Linguists debate the extent to which different languages shape their speakers’ thoughts and feelings. But there’s no question that every language contains a record of a culture and its experiences, and those distinct archives are disappearing faster than ever. Hundreds of the world’s more than 6,000 tongues have just a handful of speakers, while half of the planet’s population speaks one of just 13 languages. In

Spoken Here: Travels Among Threatened Languages (2003), Canadian journalist Mark Abley wonders what this incredible loss of diversity might mean for humanity. To find out, he spent time among speakers of languages such as Yuchi (a Native American language), Manx (a Celtic language from the Isle of Man), and Provençal (Occitan). He also considers how threatened languages are preserved or revived, studying the cases of Welsh, Hebrew, and others.

To dive deeper into this subject, take a look at *Dying Words: Endangered Languages and What They Have to Tell Us* by Nicholas Evans (1999) and *Language Death* by David Crystal (2003). For a fun look at English words and phrases that have gone down the memory hole, check out Mark Forsyth’s *Horologicon: A Day’s Jaunt Through the Lost Words of the English Language* (2012).

THE POLITICS OF LANGUAGE

Some would say this category should begin and end with the work of George Orwell, whose novels like *Nineteen*

Eighty-Four (1949) and *Animal Farm* (1945), as well as his essay “Politics and the English Language” (1946), show the ways in which words are twisted to achieve control over others. A more recent investigator of the relationship between language and political ideas is George Lakoff. In academic circles, Lakoff is known as one of the pioneers of the subfield known as cognitive linguistics. But many readers will know him for his linguistic analyses of the American political scene. In *Don’t Think of an Elephant!: Know Your Values and Frame the Debate—The Essential Guide for Progressives* (2004), Lakoff added the word “framing” to the contemporary political lexicon. Lakoff continued to develop his ideas in *The Political Mind: A Cognitive Scientist’s Guide to Your Brain and Its Politics* (2009). Conservatives, meanwhile, often criticize contemporary language for being too “politically correct.” One of the best books on the subject is *Political Correctness: A History of Semantics and Culture* by Geoffrey Hughes (2009).



LEARNING NEW LANGUAGES

If you already speak a second language, good for you: scientists now think bilingualism has lifelong cognitive benefits. But if you need an incentive (or just want to enjoy multilingualism vicariously) take a look at these books on people’s remarkable ability to learn (and even invent) new tongues. In *Babel No More: The Search for the World’s Most Extraordinary Language Learn-*

ers (2012), Michael Erard considers enduring questions of culture and cognition from the perspective of folks who can speak a dozen languages or more. The book’s personal portraits of polyglots are just as interesting as its observations about the way language works.

Erard’s subjects are prodigies; Charles Yang sees a prodigy in every child in *The Infinite Gift: How Children Learn and Unlearn the Languages of the World* (2006). Yang’s book presents an important linguistic hypothesis—young children “try out” sounds from all the world’s different languages, even those to which they are never directly exposed—but he also guides readers through many other fascinating aspects of childhood language acquisition.

Children have a penchant for making up languages; some adults do, too, producing artifacts as diverse as Elvish (J. R. R. Tolkien’s Middle Earth novels), Klingon (*Star Trek*), and Dothraki (George R. R. Martin’s *A Song of Fire and Ice* series). For the art and science of making up languages, see Arika Okrent’s *In the Land of Invented Languages: Adventures in Linguistic Creativity, Madness, and Genius* (2010).

LANGUAGES IN TRANSLATION

We like to think that a good translation conveys the exact intent of a speaker or writer into a new language. It's not so hard when you're talking about road signs or stereo instructions, but translators often struggle with the more subtle aspects of language—from the shades of meaning in a poem to the double entendres in a joke. Guy Deutscher lays out the problem in *Through the Language Glass: Why the World Looks Different in Other Languages* (2010). His book is a meditation on what it means that some languages' vocabularies do not differentiate between blue and green or that some cultures navigate the world according to the points of the compass rather than "left" and "right." Over the course of the volume, Deutscher defends a limited version of the idea that native languages affect the way their speakers actually think (a notion currently unpopular among linguists).

Whether different languages change the ways our brains work or simply befuddle our attempts to understand each other, the task of overcoming the difference falls to the translator. David Bellos, who runs a translation program at Princeton University, explores the world of this underappreciated craft in *Is That a Fish in Your Ear?: Translation and the Meaning of Everything* (2011). The title refers to the "Babel fish" from the satirical *Hitchhiker's Guide to the Galaxy*; like that book, Bellos's title is a fun romp between worlds as he considers the way translation works at the United Nations, in international newsrooms, and in the instructions that accompany self-assembled furniture. For a somewhat more serious, but no less delightful take, see *Why Translation Matters* by Edith Grossman (2010). Grossman, a translator of Spanish works into English, is best known for her version of *Don Quixote*. She makes the case for appreciating translators as artists in themselves, albeit a different kind from the original authors.

MAKING MISTAKES

A few years back, Lynne Truss's *Eats, Shoots & Leaves: The Zero Tolerance Approach to Punctuation* (2003) made militants out of folks who used to just mind their Ps and Qs. In its wake, some language mavens have advocated a less strident approach, as evidenced in Bill Walsh's *Yes, I Could Care Less: How to Be a Language Snob Without Being a Jerk* (2013). Walsh would know; he's a longtime copy editor for the *Wall Street Journal* and author of several other books on how to get things right in print. While arguing for high standards, Walsh also appreciates that correctness is situational, and as in all his books, he argues for some inter-

esting deviations from the reigning editorial authorities. Another riposte to rule mongers is *Origins of the Specious: Myths and Misconceptions of the English Language* by Patricia T. O'Conner and Stewart Kellerman (2009). These two show how "they" was once commonly used as a singular as well as a plural, a situation with which the grammar police could not possibly accept.

For a completely different take on mistakes, consider Michael Erard's *Um...: Slips, Stumbles, and Verbal Blunders, and What They Actually Mean* (2007). Erard investigates what function such two-letter words as "um" and "uh" actually perform in our parlance, as well as examining the fear of public speaking and asking how the Freudian slip became the Freudian slip.

DOTS, DASHES, AND SERIFS

Written language presents intriguing quirks and questions all its own. Certain practices, visual and grammatical, drift in and out of style as we all struggle to say what we mean in print. Until the advent of spell-checker, using the right letters for the right sounds was a major problem in English—not an issue for writers in phonetic languages like Spanish. David Crystal takes up the problem in *Spell It Out: The Curious, Enthralling and Extraordinary Story of English Spelling* (2012), explaining how orthographic oddities originate in everything from the misfit between English sounds and roman characters to



the vagaries of fashion.

Print also means punctuation; Keith Houston gets the lowdown on common and uncommon marks in *Shady Characters: The Secret Life of Punctuation, Symbols, and Other Typographical Marks* (2013). Houston's book addresses everything from the divisive debates over the use of the dash to how the Internet rescued the @ symbol from typographic obscurity.

Finally, no foray into language would be complete without a book on fonts. *Just My Type: A Book About Fonts* by Simon Garfield (2010) tells the stories of all the familiar faces from your word processor's pull-down menu, from the rise of Helvetica to the contentious career of Comic Sans. More visual types of readers may prefer *The Anatomy of Type: A Graphic Guide to 100 Typefaces* by Stephen Coles (2012). Getting in to the nitty-gritty of shoulders, spines, and tails, Coles shows us just what makes that Garamond "g" so great. ■