
Languages are constantly changing, being endlessly re-invented and re-worked by the people who use them. In his compelling new book, The Unfolding of Language: an evolutionary tour of mankind’s greatest invention, Guy Deutscher argues that the same simple processes which lie behind the rich and dynamic variety of modern human languages can also explain the initial emergence of complex language from its primitive beginnings.

Deutscher, a specialist in ancient Semitic languages and lecturer in linguistics at the University of Leiden, explains why we shouldn’t worry about changes in language — but also that we inevitably will. People have always complained about the state of their language, bemoaning the misuse of ‘proper’ language and its degeneration from a once-glorious past into an error-ridden, chaotic mess; even the mighty Cicero grumbled that the Latin of his time had deteriorated from that of the previous century. Deutscher explains why such complaints are depressingly inevitable, because “decay...is the aspect of change that is by far the most easily observable” (p.77), but also shows that, beneath the surface, the linguistic forces which conspire to erode language are closely related to the more elusive, but just as inevitable, forces of renewal and reconstruction. He illuminates his absorbing analysis of humanity’s ‘greatest invention’ with a detailed investigation of the three main forces of language change, which he identifies as economy, expressiveness and analogy. The first of these, economy, occurs because language speakers are intrinsically lazy, seldom inclined to expend more effort in pronunciation than is absolutely necessary for the listener to understand the speaker’s meaning. Economy in pronunciation leads naturally to sounds weakening, merging into one another, and being eroded in predictable ways, sometimes eventually disappearing altogether. Expressiveness, meanwhile, drives us to use increasingly extravagant words to give extra force to our utterances. Repetition of forceful expressions, however, leads inevitably to a kind of linguistic inflation, where the impact of the words is gradually diminished, and their meaning is consequently eroded and ultimately lost altogether. The third force, analogy, stems from language learners’ need to impose structure on language, to identify patterns in the language they use, and to avoid being overwhelmed with linguistic information. Once identified, however, such patterns tend to be extended beyond their original use, culminating in the innovation of new linguistic forms and constructions.

The majority of the book consists of a captivating journey through linguistic history, as Deutscher illustrates these simple forces of language change with numerous interesting examples from many different languages, both ancient and modern, familiar and exotic. In doing so, he explains such divergent linguistic phenomena as the development of case endings, how prepositions are created from words for parts of the body, and, most impressively, the gradual evolution of the spectacular complexity of the Semitic verbal system. Having guided us expertly through these processes of language change and regeneration, in the final chapter Deutscher moves on to a detailed exploration of his uniformitarian thesis, which forms the main take-home message of the book: namely that the now familiar forces of present-day language change can also
account for the origins of complex linguistic structures. Starting with a simple ancestral protolanguage containing only words for concrete things, simple actions, and ‘this’ and ‘that’, and assuming only simple ordering conventions such as reporting things in the order they happened, he explains how, in principle, all manner of linguistic paraphernalia, including pronouns, quantifiers, tenses, gender systems and subordinate clauses, can emerge through these same simple processes.

The book’s presentation of the methods and significant discoveries of historical linguists is enthusiastic and accomplished, with a keen focus on the important issues, while never overwhelming the reader with technicalities. Deutscher rightly draws attention, for instance, to the pervasiveness of metaphor throughout language, and to its vital importance in language change, both as the result of our desire for greater expressiveness, but also as the source of expressions which refer to abstract concepts. On the other hand, however, although he recognizes the powerful inventive and order-imposing force of analogy, he tends to underplay the very significant pressure on the replication of linguistic structure imposed by the need for meanings to be reconstructible. An endless variety of potential utterances can, in principle, be invented and produced by speakers, but only those whose meanings can be successfully understood by listeners (and learnt by children) stand any chance of being used by others in the future, and of becoming established in the language. New metaphors, therefore, cannot be too obscure or created randomly, but must instead be built on existing linguistic patterns; these patterns must be extended systematically and relatively predictably, so that the hearer will still be able to work out the appropriate meaning from the linguistic context. The speaker’s desire for expressiveness is always restrained by the hearer’s need to be able to reconstruct the meaning.

Deutscher is, however, properly careful to set out the coherent theoretical basis on which his uniformitarian account of the origin of linguistic structure is based. He rejects the temptation to stretch his theory further back than it will comfortably go, and renders his account all the more convincing by insisting on a foundation of empirically verifiable data. Surprisingly, however, he appears reluctant to enter the lively debate about the innateness of language, and instead leaves the reader to draw the obvious conclusion: if, as he so vividly and cogently describes, known processes of cultural evolution can in themselves give rise to complex linguistic structures, then there is surely no requirement for such structures to be explicitly hard-wired into the human brain.

The Unfolding of Language is a stimulating, informative, and immensely readable account of language change and evolution, which will appeal both to the professional linguist and to those interested in understanding more about why language is the way it is. Although he occasionally strays into a self-consciously erudite style of humour, Deutscher’s writing is admirably accessible, and his enthusiasm for his subject matter unmistakable and infectious. Deutscher has produced a fascinating book, which argues lucidly and persuasively that we can explain the remote history of language by understanding its recent past and its ongoing evolution.
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