

Theories of Language Origin

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English 315

What is Language?

- Your definition
- Some other definitions

6 Essential Components of a Language Definition

- System
- Conventional
- Vocal
- Signs (Symbols?)
- Human
- Communication

Linguists divide language into three inter-linked systems

- Phonology: The study of sounds
- Morphology: How sounds combine to form words
- Syntax: How words combine to convey meaning

Each speaker perceives the three components differently

- Societal norms of prestige dialects
- Individual perceptions

Issues of Graphology (writing of language)

- punctuation / spelling / capitalization
- Is graphology language or something different?



Some Theories of Language Origin



Divine Fiat:

- Language is a gift from God



Echoic (Bow-Wow):

- Language imitates sounds in nature (Onomatopoeia)



Interjectional (Pooh-pooh!)

- Language arose from instinctive emotional cries, expressive for example of joy or pain



Nativistic (Ding-dong)

- Words are inherent in what they describe



Jespersen's Hypothesis (Woo woo)

- Language arises from sounds of courtship



Labor (Yo-he-ho)

- Language arose from noises made by people engaged in joint effort



Oral Gesture (Chew-Chew)

- Language results from people making gestures with their mouths



Contact Theory (Wah-Wah)

- Language begins with a cry that demands satisfaction of some desire (e.g., domestic animals begging and infants crying for parents)



Gene Mutation (Uh-Oh?)

- Recent idea (2002) that language began 200,000 years ago with a mutation on gene FOXP2



So What?

- What do these theories prove?
- It's most interesting to think about what a theory says about the culture that produced it. What are its beliefs, anxieties, wishes?
- No one theory ever gained universal acceptance although elements of many remain in circulation



English as a World Language

- Desire for universal language
 - Babel, Volapuk, Esperanto
- Different contenders
 - Latin, French, English
- English is not the most widely spoken language; its power is in the number of people who speak it as a second language



Some Assets & Liabilities of English as a World Language


Assets

- Cosmopolitan Vocabulary
- Inflectional Simplicity
- Natural Gender



Liabilities

- Idiomatic expressions
- Inconsistent spelling
- Attempts at spelling reform



“A rough-coated, dough-faced, thoughtful ploughman strode through the streets of Scarborough; after falling into a slough, he coughed and hiccoughed.



GHOUGHPTTEIGHBTEAU = ?

- P as in HICCOUGH
- O as in THOUGH
- T as in PTOMAIN
- A as in NEIGH
- T as in DEBT
- O as in BUREAU
- = POTATO