



The Power of Babel: A Natural History of Language

By John McWhorter

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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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Editorial Review

From Library Journal

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
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From [Booklist](#)

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 Herbst*

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Review

There are some 6,000 human languages. But how and why are there so many? How do languages evolve over time - and is there some original or ur-language from which they all developed? Is language fundamentally encoded in us when we are born, or completely learned? These and many other related questions are investigated in this intriguing book. McWhorter is an American Professor of Linguistics and speaks many languages. But he wears his learning lightly and wittily, and has managed to make this book both accessible and authoritative. He's especially good at teasing out how English and French are shot through with fragments of other tongues, and reflective of their only partially buried pasts.

Users Review

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Amelia Brown:

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Sonya Ewing:

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