5 Unsolved Language Mysteries
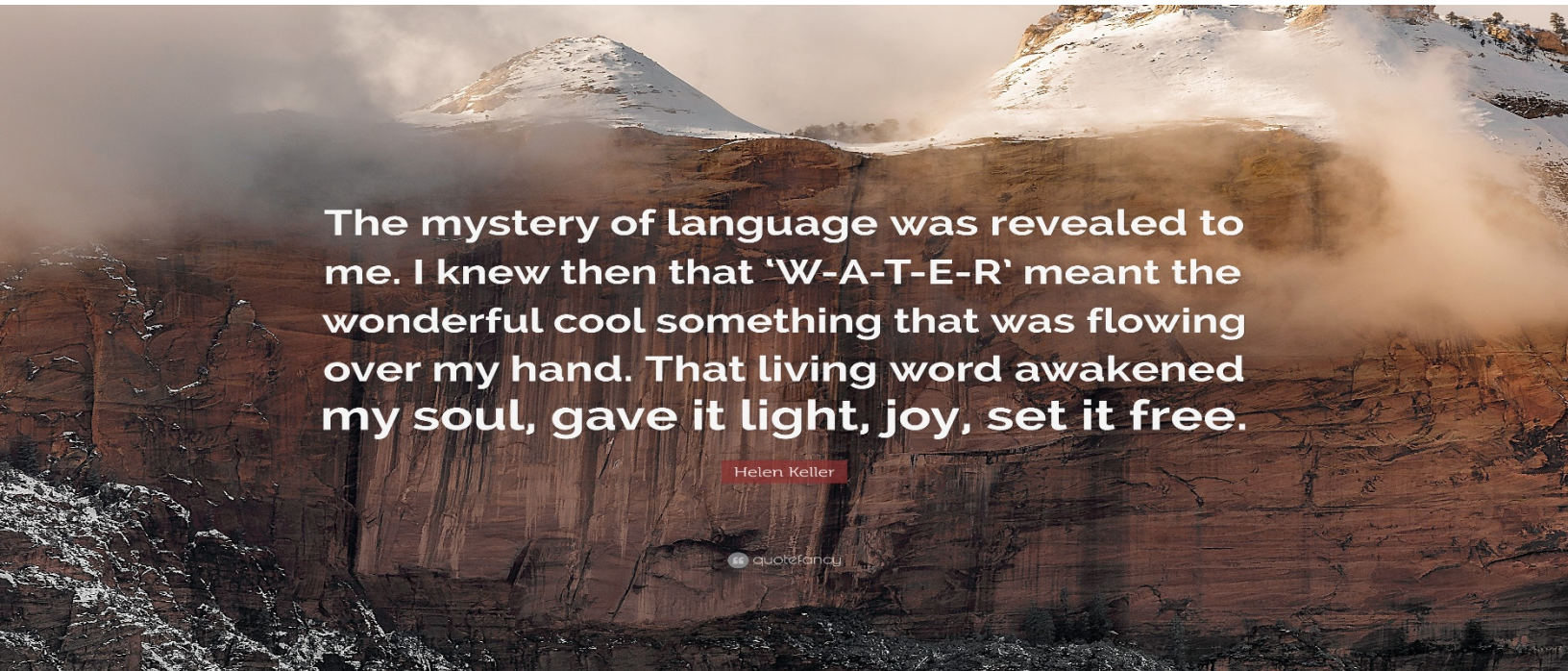
Excerpt from

1. The origin of human language

Perhaps the greatest human language mystery of all is where exactly it came from. It is something all of mankind uses every day, whether it's in spoken or written form, yet no one knows exactly when, where or how it started.

Professor **Noam Chomsky** is one of the leading experts on linguistics and believes it is language that makes us human. However, in an interview with Knoow.it TV he notes that his field of expertise is also home to some "incredible mysteries". Language, he explains, is a "core capacity" for humans, but *"where it comes from, how it works; nobody knows"*. Scholars Morten H. Christiansen and Simon Kirby even go so far as to label the evolution of languages as: *"The hardest problem in science."*

Chomsky is a supporter of the discontinuity theory of language evolution. This is the idea that, because language is such a unique phenomenon and there is nothing it can be compared to, it must have started spontaneously and suddenly at some point in the evolution of humans. The other main philosophy is the continuity theory, which holds that because language is so complex there must have been gradual stepping stones that led to its development.

The world of language is truly fascinating and there are so many more language mysteries besides the ones mentioned here. Do you know of any more language mysteries? Let us know in the comments below!

The mystery of language was revealed to me. I knew then that 'W-A-T-E-R' meant the wonderful cool something that was flowing over my hand. That living word awakened my soul, gave it light, joy, set it free.

Helen Keller

The mystery of language evolution

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Abstract

Understanding the evolution of language requires evidence regarding origins and processes that led to change. In the last 40 years, there has been an explosion of research on this problem as well as a sense that considerable progress has been made. We argue instead that the richness of ideas is accompanied by a poverty of evidence, with essentially no explanation of how and why our linguistic computations and representations evolved.

We show that, to date, (1) studies of nonhuman animals provide virtually no relevant parallels to human linguistic communication, and none to the underlying biological capacity; (2) the fossil and archaeological evidence does not inform our understanding of the computations and representations of our earliest ancestors, leaving details of origins and selective pressure unresolved; (3) our understanding of the genetics of language is so impoverished that there is little hope of connecting genes to linguistic processes any time soon; (4) all modeling attempts have made unfounded assumptions, and have provided no empirical tests, thus leaving any insights into language's origins unverifiable.

Based on the current state of evidence, we submit that the most fundamental questions about the origins and evolution of our linguistic capacity remain as mysterious as ever, with considerable uncertainty about the discovery of either relevant or conclusive evidence that can adjudicate among the many open hypotheses. We conclude by presenting some suggestions about possible paths forward.

Who decides what words mean?

Bound by rules, yet constantly changing, language might be the ultimate self-regulating system, with nobody in charge

.... In researching Samuel Johnson's dictionary for my new book, *Talk on the Wild Side* (2018), I made a startling find. Johnson, in describing his plan for the dictionary to the Earl of Chesterfield in 1747, wrote that

[B]uxom, which means only *obedient*, is now made, in familiar phrases, to stand for *wanton*; because in an ancient form of marriage, before the Reformation, the bride promised complaisance and obedience, in these terms: 'I will be bonair and *buxom* in bed and at board.'

When most people think of *buxom* today, neither 'obedient' nor 'wanton' is what comes to mind (To my wife: this is why a Google Images search for *buxom* is in my search history, I promise.)

Turning to the *OED*, I found that *buxom* had come from a medieval word *buhsam*, cognate to the modern German *biegsam*, or 'bendable'. From physical to metaphorical (the natural extension), it came to mean 'pliable' of a person, or – as Johnson put it – obedient. Then *buxom* kept on moving: a short hop from 'obedient' to 'amiable', and then another one to 'lively, gay'. (William Shakespeare describes a soldier of 'buxom valour' in *Henry V*.) From there, it is another short jump to 'healthy, vigorous', which seems to have been the current meaning around Johnson's time. From 'good health' it was another logical extension to physical plumpness, then to plumpness specifically on a woman, to big-breasted.

The leap from 'obedient' to 'busty' seems extraordinary until we look at it step by step. *Nice* used to mean 'foolish'. *Silly* used to mean 'holy'. *Assassin* is from the plural of the Arabic word for 'hashish(-eater)', and *magazine* from the Arabic word for a storehouse. This is just what words do. *Prestigious* used to be pejorative, meaning glittery but not substantive. These kinds of changes are common.

Excerpt from **The World's Most Efficient Languages**

How much do you really need to say to put a sentence together?

The Atlantic | by *John McWhorter* *teaches linguistics at Columbia University, hosts the podcast* *Lexicon Valley, and is the author, most recently, of* Words on the Move.

Just as fish presumably don't know they're wet, many English speakers don't know that the way their language works is just one of endless ways it could have come out. It's easy to think that what one's native language puts words to, and how, reflects the fundamentals of reality.

But languages are strikingly different in the level of detail they require a speaker to provide in order to put a sentence together….

…If there were a prize for the busiest language, then a language like Kabardian, also known as Circassian and spoken in the Caucasus, would win. In the simple sentence "The men saw me," the word for "saw" is *səqʾayəɬaaɣʷəaɣhaś* (pronounced roughly "suck-a-LAGH-a-HESH")**.** This seems like a majestic monster of a word, and yet despite its air of "supercalifragilisticexpealidocious," the word for "saw" is every bit as ordinary for Karbadian-speakers as English-speakers' "saw" is for them. It's just that Karbadian-speakers have to pack so much more into their version. In *səqʾayəɬaaɣʷəaɣhaś*, other than the part meaning "see," there is a bit that reiterates that it's me who was seen, even though the sentence would include a separate word for "me" elsewhere. Then there are other bits that show that the seeing was most significant to "me" rather than to the men or anyone else; that the seeing was done by more than one person (despite the sentence spelling out elsewhere that it was plural "men" who did the seeing); that this event did not happen in the present; that on top of this, the event happened specifically in the past rather than the future; and finally a bit indicating that the speaker really means what he's saying.

The prize for most economical language could go to certain colloquial dialects of Indonesian that are rarely written but represent the daily reality of Indonesian in millions of mouths. For example, in the Riau dialect spoken in Sumatra, *ayam* means chicken and *makan* means eat, but "*Ayam makan*" doesn't mean only "The chicken is eating." Depending on context, "*Ayam makan*" can mean the "chickens are eating," "a chicken is eating," "the chicken is eating," "the chicken will be eating," "the chicken eats," "the chicken has eaten," "someone is eating the chicken," "someone is eating for the chicken," "someone is eating with the chicken," "the chicken that is eating," "where the chicken is eating," and "when the chicken is eating." If chickens and eating are *à propos*, the assumption is that everybody in the conversation knows what's what. Thus for a wide variety of situations the equivalent of "chicken eat" will do—and does.

So does the contrast between Riau Indonesian's "chicken eat" and Kabardian's "they saw me and it affected me, not now, and I really mean it" mean that each language gives its speakers a different way of looking at the world? It's an intriguing idea, first formulated by anthropologist and linguist Edward Sapir and amateur linguist (and fire inspector!) Benjamin Whorf. If it were

correct, an English-speaker would generally think about the past more than a Chinese-speaker would, while Germans would think more about movement than Americans or Brits.

Experiments have shown that this is often true to a faint, flickering degree a psychologist can detect in the artifice of experimental conditions. But does this mean a different way of experiencing life? Is a Kabardian shopkeeper in the Caucasus more exquisitely attuned to the nuances of experience than a Riau Indonesian-speaking fisherman in Sumatra? If that Kabardian shopkeeper's jam-packed verbs mean that he vibrates in tune to the jots and tittles of life, then doesn't one have to say that the Riau Indonesian speaker, whose grammar directs his attention to so few details, is something of a limp string on the guitar?

How deep are effects of language on thought?
Time estimation in speakers of English, Indonesian, Greek, and Spanish

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The findings we present here are difficult to reconcile with a 'universalist' view of language-thought relations according to which language calls upon pre-formed, antecedently available non-linguistic concepts, which are presumed to be "universal" (Pinker, 1994, pg. 82) and "immutable" (Papafragou, Massey, & Gleitman, 2002, pg. 216). Rather, these results support what we might call a *deep* version of the linguistic relativity hypothesis (to distinguish it from the so-called *weak* version which posits that language affects 'thinking for speaking,' and from *strong* linguistic determinism). The particular languages that we speak can influence not only the representations we build for the purpose of speaking, but also the non-linguistic representations we build for remembering, acting on, and perhaps even perceiving the world around us.