How Language Works: How Babies Babble, Words Change Meaning, and Languages Live or Die

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In this fascinating survey of everything from how sounds become speech to how names work, David Crystal answers every question you might ever have had about the nuts and bolts of language in his usual highly illuminating way. Along the way, we find out about eyebrow flashes, whistling languages, how parents teach their children to speak, how politeness travels across languages and how the way we talk show not just how old we are but where we're from and even who we want to be.

Whether looking at the whistle languages of the Canary Islands or describing the layout of the human throat, this landmark book will enrich the lives of everyone who reads it.

How Language Works: How Babies Babble, Words Change Meaning, and Languages Live or Die Details

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From Reader Review How Language Works: How Babies Babble, Words Change Meaning, and Languages Live or Die for online ebook

Louise says

This book is arranged in chapters that can stand alone or be read as a volume. Chapters are divided into sub chapters which similarly stand alone or can be read as a cohesive work of prose.

While the author is British, the emphasis is universal. The British influence shows the most in the discussion of dialects.

The articles vary from being anecdotal to factually meaty. The chapters on vocabulary show how vocabulary is learned with great anecdotes and factual backup. Like Crystal, I think that this is a very much neglected area of language learning.

I like that he uses interesting sentences and words for examples. Too often books on linguistics provide dull stilted examples.

Russell says

I would almost think about rating this book 4 stars (and then buying a copy), but there were several chapters that were extra informative (the type that makes me sleepy) and slightly fluffy. However, I very much enjoyed what I did learn regarding basic linguistic concepts, the many facets of cultural communication, what we know about how the brain works in constructing language flow (verbal, written, physical, etc) and the plethora of other connect-the-dots type of information (73 chapters worth). I'm just getting into learning about linguistics and this was my first book. Overall, even though I whimsically grabbed it from off the shelf at the library, I feel that my time was well spent while reading it.

Katya Epstein says

Personally I found this book frustrating: It covers too much material in too few pages (and my edition is almost 500 pages of very small print). The coverage of each topic was too superficial to be engrossing. I already knew a lot of the material and was disappointed not to learn more: He would mention something that would pique my interest, but then move right on to something else. For the material I didn't already know, the discussion was too cursory to really stick: no examples, analysis, or anecdotes. I don't feel like I know any more than I did before I read the book. Also I don't think he had room for his writing style to really shine the way it does in some of his books.

That said, this is David Crystal, so of course the writing is very clear and pithy. And I did enjoy the section on conversations (if he has written a whole book on this topic I would like to read it... and perhaps suggest it to a couple friends...), and I especially enjoyed his attack on the Lynne Trusses of the world (more even, oddly, than his whole book on the topic, The Fight for English).

Chris Little says

An enjoyable overview of linguistics. Crystal's 73 chapters can be read consecutively, or - he claims - dipped into at random. Each chapter is a short introduction to one topic. For example, 'How vocabulary grows' or 'How to study dialects'. Since each is only five pages or so, you know not to expect too much - it's an orientation to the topic.
Towards the end of the book (unless you randomly start there, of course), Crystal shows his great desire in writing: to encourage more interest in and concern for language. (That's definitely language as a whole, rather than languages individually.) For him, language and all aspects of its study are eminent in grasping human culture's richness. I think he's right to be such a proponenet of linguistic study, of respect for language.

Laurel says

There's so much information in this book that it's difficult to absorb it all, let alone recall it a few days after the fact. To a language enthusiast like me, it was fascinating; I could see how many or perhaps most readers might get bored. Some chapters are much more interesting than others: I'm not that jazzed about the explanation of how we physically produce a uvular fricative, but I love the discussions of how humans learn language and about common features that all languages share. Crystal really does write it as though it were a "how to" manual, but I don't think it's less valuable in that respect than it is as a sheer comprehensive discussion of many aspects of linguistics.

Noah says

A good introduction to languages and everything about them. I found the chapters on language families particularly interesting. As it is only a introduction, it does not go deeply into the specifics.

Angus Stirling says

"Aren't you lovely!' said a man outside the window of a car showroom, unaware that a linguist was passing him at the time.'

73 pithy chapters giving an introduction to the many facets of language.

???? says

A very nice overview on various aspects of language. One book obviously can’t sum up all aspects of language, but I found this book somewhat lacking in some aspects, such as written language part and chapters about language families. Anyway, this book is very easy to understand and I’d recommend it to

everyone who would like to explore linguistics.

Rossdavidh says

Subtitle: How Babies Babble, Words Change Meaning, and Languages Live or Die. It took me a bit to figure out what about this book on linguistics seemed odd to me: there's no Big Idea. Which is kind of cool, really.

By "Big Idea", I mean the grand overarching theory that the author is in the throes of. Like Noam Chomsky's Universal Grammar, or Stephen Pinker's rejection of the Blank Slate. It doesn't mean Crystal has nothing to say. However, what you will not find here is a Grand Thesis, which ties it all together. He's a guy who's thought about language a lot, apparently most of his adult life (he was born in 1941), and this is a book where he pretty much summarizes what he knows about it.

There's chapters on how our mouth parts work to produce speech, how children learn to speak, how we write (and how we used to write in the past), sign language, how we learn grammar and how it differs between language types, how dialects form, coexist, and sometimes die, how languages are related, what parts of the brain interpret language and what happens when we lose them, and how electronic media change how we use language.

Every one of these is a meaty enough topic for an entire, or several books of its own. In some sense, it's ludicrous to give each one of them a few dozen pages. But, on the other hand, that's somewhat like saying it's ludicrous to have a globe, when the level of detail for each nation is too little to guide you anywhere. Perhaps it's true, but it can be useful to have a mental map of the big picture.

Maybe I should say, the Big Picture. Perhaps Crystal has no Big Idea, because instead he's giving us the Big Picture. This, is the breadth and diversity of the topic of Language(s). The list of figures illustrates how broad that is:
1 General arrangement of the vocal organs
...
3 Movement of a single air particle
...
10 Egyptian hieroglyphs over time
...
14 Two-handed and one-handed finger-spelling
...
18 Some words for 'father' in Indo-European

You get the idea. This is a bit like browsing the encyclopedia, back when there were encyclopedias to browse through. It stimulates the brain, it keeps moving, and it gives you an idea of what things you might want to go back to look at in more detail (in some other book, perhaps with a Big Idea). Bully for David Crystal. Thumbs up!

Stacy says

Very interesting

Matilda says

A clear and concise listing of all the issues that are related to language, from the physiological (how we produce sounds, how we hear sounds) to how we use language. The latter is, of course, a large subject, including such items as how babies learn language from their parents, how we mean something different than what we actually say ("It's cold in here!" can be interpreted as "Close the window, please!"), and my favorite subject, the status of dialects and how its in constant influx.

This book is out there to entice you to get interested in linguistics (it even says so at the end), and it's not an in-depth look at all the issues it mentions. The book does its job of including so many different aspects of language together in one spot well.

More here in my blog.

Wing says

The preeminent David Crystal begins this book for the general reader with some straightforward descriptions of what phonetics, graphetics, and cherology are all about. He then moves on to the areas of semantic and linguistic analysis. The sociological and political aspects of dialects and languages are then discussed. Finally he delivers succinctly a reprimand against prescriptivist fantasy and ethnocentric parochialism. Parts of the book may seem tedious and superficial but if one reads between the lines some profound conclusions can still be drawn. Overall a profitable read.

Paul Magnussen says

I found this book somewhat disappointing.

Since the author is clearly one of the top dudes in the language business, it seems not unreasonable to expect its accurate use in a work of his. It's a little unnerving, therefore, to read on the flyleaf that he “received the Order of the British Empire”*.

Fortunately, this sloppiness does not extend to the interior of the book (although prescriptivists may be irritated by words such as “mediums”, and I had a few uneasy twinges even apart from that. When the author says that small communities can easily be decimated or wiped out [p. 337], does he mean reduced by a tenth, or to a tenth? The context seems to imply the latter.)

The organization is logical, systematic, and well thought out. In fact, since we learn things by organizing them in our minds rather than by ingesting them in unstructured lumps, the layout of the book and the clear explanations of terminology are themselves useful learning tools.

Nevertheless, despite all the expertise and careful organization, the impression I got at the start of this book was of facts dumped on to the page the way a trashcan is emptied into a garbage truck; or — more to the point — the way a schoolboy told to write an essay on the Canadian Redwood dumps the relevant contents of his encyclopædia. Assertions are made with a sort of stolid incuriosity about the reasons for them that I would normally ascribe either to a dull mind, or to total disinterest in the subject matter. Since presumably neither of these can apply here, I assumed there must be a third reason that escaped me.

For instance, in the chapter on childhood language acquisition (*How We Learn Grammar*), we're told that it can take several years before errors such as "Are we going on the bus home?" are eliminated [p. 257]. What we're not told is why this is considered an error: if "Are we going on the bus tomorrow?" is alright, why should the first sentence not be?

Likewise, we learn that "a few advanced constructions are not acquired until the early school years, e.g. the use of 'some' vs. 'any' [...] or the use of 'hardly' or 'scarcely' ". But there is no explanation of *why* these constructions are considered advanced — which in fact they are, having whole sections to themselves in books that teach English as a Second Language. Remember, the title of this book is *How Language Works*!

We're told that backward-looking coreference relationships are known as 'anaphoric' and forward-looking ones as 'cataphoric', but not why; and after all, you can't expect every reader to be a classical scholar!

"I've got a pencil. Do you have one?" This is given as an example of substitution, but it seems decidedly strange to me, being neither British (as is the author) nor American: I would expect either "I've got a pencil. Have you got one?" or "I have a pencil. Do you have one?" (cf. "do" in Fowler). But the author passes over this without remark, so perhaps it's just me.

The traditional Clause Analysis, that those of us who are old enough had to suffer through in school, is described; but no explanation is given of why this is now considered unsatisfactory or inadequate. A couple of references are made in passing to Chomsky, but none that sheds any light on his work, which (let's face it) is as opaque to most people as Quantum Chromodynamics.

And so on.

More generally, topics are abandoned just when they're getting interesting. For instance, we learn [p. 288] that the character of a person's voice can affect the way in which a jury judges the credibility of what is said; but then the discussion veers off in another direction. So perhaps everything is simply the result of trying to cram too much into a single book.

It really started to come into focus for me when the author moved on from grammar to the subject of different languages; and, in particular, how they live or die (I see that Professor Crystal is bilingual in English and Welsh, which may go some way towards explaining this). From this point on, I found the material far more engaging, although still disappointingly brief. Fortunately, there is an interesting-looking list of further reading.

Summary

So all in all, I would say this book is worth reading: the author is clearly an expert; compresses into a reasonable space a large amount of material not easily found elsewhere; and writes more than serviceably.

But if you haven’t read any books on language before, I would still recommend Steven Pinker’s The Language Instinct (with its very clear exposition of language acquisition, among many other things) first. And his Words and Rules would be a strong contender for second.

*For those unfamiliar with the arcane British honours system, the Order is an organization, and one can no more receive it than one can receive the Internal Revenue Service. One may be made a Member of it (M.B.E.), or, as in Professor Crystal’s case, an Officer of it (O.B.E.), etc.

Jaylia3 says

This is an interesting and easy to read book. The chapters do not need to be read consecutively, each is a self-contained essay on some aspect of language.

I had hardly started the book, when it started me on an observational quest for an "Eyebrow Flash". I got one that same night from the ticket seller when I went to see a movie. Here is what the book says on page 7:

"Some visual effects are widely used in the cultures of the world. An example is the EYEBROW FLASH, used unconsciously when people approach each other and wish to show that they are ready to make social contact. Each person performs a single upward movement of the eyebrows, keeping them raised for about a sixth of a second. The effect is so automatic that we are hardly ever conscious of it. But we become uneasy if we do not receive an eyebrow flash when we expect one (from someone we know); and to receive an eyebrow flash from someone we do not know can be uncomfortable, embarrassing, or even threatening."

Daniel Taylor says

While this book isn't specifically geared toward helping writers become better, it's a comprehensive look at how language develops and is learned and used.

In 73 chapters it covers introducing language, spoken language, written language, sign language, language structure, discourse, dialects, languages, multilingualism, and looking after language.

Despite its length, the book is a fast read and unexpectedly enjoyable. Think of it as a introduction to language as a whole, as it doesn't go into great detail about any of the components. All its chapters are short.

It's a great read and highly recommended.
