


The 5-Minute Linguist: Bite-sized Essays on Language and Languages

September 2012 – Volume 16, Number 2

The 5-Minute Linguist: Bite-sized Essays on Language and Languages		
Author:	E.M. Rickerson and Barry Hilton (Eds.) (2012)	
Publisher:	Sheffield U.K.: Equinox	
Pages	ISBN	Price
303 pages	978-1-908049-49-0	\$16.95 USD



In 2005, as part of the “Year of Languages” observances in the U.S.A., a radio series was broadcast under the heading *Talkin’ about talk*. The following year the series was captured in book form, using a question and answer format—targeting a broad audience of readers interested in language and languages. This is a second, updated edition with sixty-five mostly single-authored sections. Some of the questions which form the chapter headings sound deceptively straightforward “*How many languages are there in the world?*” and “*Where did English come from?*” Others are even more intriguing, such as “*Can you use language to solve crimes?*” Some consider seemingly factual matters, “*What is the language of the United States?*” And others are more issue-oriented: “*What’s the right way to put words together?*”; “*Why do we need translators if we have dictionaries?*”

A number of features suggest that this book should be popular with its intended readership, namely “anyone who has a question about languages or the nature of language” (p. xiii). One feature is the broad sweep of the topics, ranging from

those that consider specific languages such as Arabic, Icelandic, Russian; the homeless Esperanto; and others that relatively few of us might readily recognize: Gullah. Various types of English also have attention: Pidgin, British and American—as do distinctions between languages. For instance, Neil Jacobs, of the Ohio State University, asks *What's the difference between Hebrew and Yiddish?* Other chapters consider groups of language users such as polyglots, babies and animals. There is even the question *What happens if you are raised without language?* which Susan Curtiss of the UCLA answers with reference to wolf children. Then there are chapters on issues such as *Why do people fight over languages?*—a question for which there are some literal examples from Pakistan, Sri Lanka and Spain.

Another important feature of the text is its accessibility to non-specialists, as one would expect from material first used in broadcast form. The explanations are made in straightforward, but not childish language as if one were listening to a spoken explanation. There is no internal referencing, although each piece ends with an annotated reading list as well as cross-referencing to other chapters in the book that deal with related topics. The 13-page index allows the reader to leap from section to section, following particular interests.

The editors have canvassed contributors mainly from British and North American universities. Although not all are necessarily famous names in the field of linguistics or applied linguistics (some are), their credentials are impressive in terms of their knowledge and their own command of languages. One of the editors, Barry Hilton, author of the chapter *What was the original language?* is described as an armchair philologist and recovering polyglot. The sparse biographical details will send some readers looking for other of the writers' publications. For instance, after reading Nicholas Ostler's chapter on *lingua franca*, I tracked down and re-read his substantial *Empires of the world: A language history of the world* where he is billed as having a working knowledge of twenty-six languages.

Making the chapter headings into questions is more than a literary device. In skimming through the titles, I was interested to notice how many of the questions listed I had actually been asked over the years. When a child once asked me why everyone in the world spoke with a foreign accent except people in his own country, it would have helped to have *What causes foreign accents?* by Steven H. Weinberger of George Mason University, Virginia. His historical and current comments include one about the age after which it is almost impossible to speak a new language without some trace of the original one. Other chapters address questions about how the brain copes with multiple languages and whether language influences thought. Addressing the latter question, Geoffrey Pullam, from the University of Edinburgh, points out encouragingly that language does not form “a shell within which your thought is confined” (p. 82)—and that nothing is untranslatable.

As well as language and languages, the topic of language learning is also dealt with throughout the book, having special attention in such chapters as *What does*

it take to learn a language well? by Nina Garrett, whose first language was Dutch. Her broad response addresses commonly given answers: age, aptitude, time, exposure and, of course, motivation.

Finally, there is the feature of the chapters' length. The "bite-sized" descriptor of the subtitle is well chosen, since each is about two to three pages long. The editors have aimed for breadth rather than depth, which makes the book almost like an enlarged dictionary. It would be surprising if readers stopped after tracking down the one question that first caught their eye.

Categorising this book is not easy. Is it a reference book? Yes. While the "bite-sized" accounts do not pretend to tell all, they do inform and they do start the reader thinking. Is it a 'coffee table' book? Yes if the term means something that people leave around the house for everyone to pick up and enjoy often, which leads to a final feature worth mentioning. Although the book is clearly written for adults, it is easy to imagine younger readers enjoying it, particularly because of the clearly worded questions that are the chapter headings but also because there are real questions that children (as well as adults) ask. For those who like a book to add colour to their shelves in both senses of the word, this one is attractively packed in a bright orange cover. It is warmly recommended to all ages, to specialists and to those who might one day become specialists.

References

Ostler, N. (2005). *Empires of the world: A language history of the world*. London: Harper.

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