

Book Reviews

Why is this a question? Everything about the origins and oddities of language you never thought to ask (a review)

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As part of its subtitle, this book discusses *Everything about the origins and oddities of language you never thought to ask*. It asks 26 questions about language, ranging from broader questions such as what a word or a language is, through issues regarding the alphabet and parts of speech and word order, as well as reading, speaking and writing skills, ending up with *How Do We Understand?* and *Why Is This a Question?* and a look at body language research in *Why Do We Use Our Hands When We Talk?* It also includes at the end 14 puzzles with solutions supported by references and the all-important index.

Paul Jones' book starts by asking about languages and words and where they come from. Although the book is published in English it's primarily about world languages, in which the English language plays an important part. It uses examples from all the languages in the world from Mandarin Chinese to pidgin and is fascinating on how language developed from the articulation of the voice in response to crisis situations to the development of national and regional languages and dialects to fulfil the needs of particular communities. He also introduces research and theories which help explain how language originated, particularly in relation to animals.

One fascinating chapter asks which language is the hardest one in the world to learn. Many would say English because it has such a huge vocabulary. The Oxford English Dictionary includes definitions of over 200,000 words. However, vocabulary alone is not the issue. To help its diplomats being posted abroad the United States Foreign Services Institute split the world's languages into four categories depending on the time it was expected to take to become reasonably fluent. The categories rose from Level 1, the easiest, to level IV, the most demanding. Dutch, French and Swedish were in Category Level I, estimated as taking from twenty-four to thirty week's tuition to achieve reasonable fluency. German was in Category Level II, alongside Swahili and Category Level III included Czech, Finnish Icelandic and Polish, together with Armenian, Hebrew, Mongolian, Urdu, and Vietnamese. So, what are the hardest languages to learn as judged by the Foreign Service Institute? Category Level IV, labelled 'super hard' by Jones, includes Arabic, Cantonese, Japanese, Korean and Mandarin and are estimated to take up to 2,000 hours of coaching, often combined with study periods in the relevant country. One of the problems the English language does face is how to spell English words. In *Why is Q always followed by U?* Jones looks into the

'The final question in the book explores why we use our hands when we talk – in other words, the importance of body language or as Jones describes it, paralanguage. He describes research carried out at the University of Naples in 2019 where a fund-raising speech animated by a speaker making gestures as she spoke made a stronger impact, attracting lots of donations, whereas a similar speech with no hand gestures attracted much lower subscriptions. What paralanguage does is to give alternative meanings to the same phrase according to how the speaker feels'

history of written English and shows how the spelling has varied over the centuries depending on the influence of foreign languages on English. It started with the introduction of Germanic languages overtaken by Latin after the Roman invasion and the Runic symbols gradually being replaced by the Roman ABC alphabet. Next came the Vikings and the Anglo-Saxons. The influence of the Normans after their invasion of Britain in 1066 substituted Norman French for Anglo-Saxon, influencing the written work produced by scribes and establishing the language firmly as part of English by the 14th and 15th centuries.

One of the problems affecting spelling was the handwriting of scribes from different backgrounds using different spelling systems. The invention of printing in the 1400s by Johannes Gutenberg in Germany introduced an element of mass production with a more integrated spelling but the arrival of William Caxton from Bruges, in modern Belgium, to open Britain's first printing press in 1476 with some of his Bruges print setters meant that Flemish and Dutch spelling crept into English orthography.

The written word could keep up with changes in pronunciation, however. As Jones points out, the 'great vowel shift'; of the late 14th to early 17th centuries changed pronunciation so that the spoken word didn't correspond to its written form. So, we ended up with pronunciation which often did not conform to spelling and this was intensified by the introduction of words from Latin and Greek during the European Renaissance. In addition, a new spelling of many words in English

was published by Noah Webster in his 1828 *American Dictionary of the English Language* including *color* not *colour*, *center* not *centre* and *dialog* not *dialogue*; spelling differences that still confuse writers on their computers today.

But why is the letter *q* followed by *u*? Originally in Anglo-Saxon, the word *queen* was written as *cwen* and *quick* as *cwik* but the Normans replaced it with *qu* from the French. But, as Jones explains, *qu* was originally from Latin and originated in the Etruscan language, 3000 years ago.

The book is full of examples, with theories explained simply and entertainingly supported by examples of research studies conducted in universities and institutes worldwide. A key contribution is the influence of neurolinguistics research on the understanding and production of language. In answering the question, *How Do We Speak?* Jones explains how the process of reading works and how information is received through the eyes and analysed by the brain. He goes on to explain how in the 1860s the French surgeon Paul Broca was able to discover the area of the brain that produced speech by operating on a patient with epilepsy who was unable to speak. He and the German Carl Wernicke, a neurosurgeon in Germany in the 1870s, were the first to discover areas of the brain which were able to produce and comprehend spoken language, discoveries that modern neurosurgical research has greatly expanded.

The final question in the book explores why we use our hands when we talk – in other words, the importance of body language or as Jones describes it, paralanguage. He describes research carried out at the University of Naples in 2019 where a fund-raising speech animated by a speaker making gestures as she spoke made a stronger impact, attracting lots of donations, whereas a similar speech with no hand gestures attracted much lower subscriptions. What paralanguage does is to give alternative meanings to the same phrase according to how the speaker feels. Jones gives the example, of a sentence like, 'I'm not going', which could be an expression of regret with eyes turned down, a gently tilted head, arching eyebrows, and a soft tone of voice. The same expression could also signify a refusal to go and may be delivered in a much harder tone of voice with a challenging direct eye contact, a frowning expression and arms folded. The difference emphasises the need for teachers to go beyond vocabular, grammar, phonology and social context and intercultural diversity of expression but also to consider the influence

on meaning of proxemics (physical distance), vocalics (the tone of voice and speed of delivery), oculusics (eye movement) and kinetics (body movement). All these shape how we communicate. Another interesting discovery was that the rhythm of speech, of gestures and even of how words are used in repetition introduce a motor gesture which stimulates the brain of the listener, a technique frequently used by public presenters, especially politicians, making their case. Neurological research has found that hand gestures can actually stimulate the language processing areas of the brain. Gestures can help us listen and understand.

The book is a fascinating and instructive read and source of information both theoretical and practical on how the human race has learned to communicate verbally and in writing and how languages and different communication skills have developed. Take it one chapter at a time to enjoy its presentation and the information it provides. It will provide in many cases an unexpected but valuable research resource and will be useful to researchers and teachers interested in the growth and development of language and the linguistic and neurological research that supports it, expressed in a very readable and practical way.

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