

Review of

SPEAK: A SHORT HISTORY OF LANGUAGES

Tore Janson

Oxford University Press, viii+301pp, £12.99

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LANGUAGE IN DANGER: HOW LANGUAGE LOSS THREATENS OUR FUTURE

Andrew Dalby

Allen Lane, The Penguin Press, xii+311pp, £18.99

ISBN 0 71 399443 6

Published May 2002

John McWhorter

THE POWER OF BABEL: A NATURAL HISTORY OF LANGUAGES

Heinemann, 327pp, £16.99

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Three books with but a single thought: the past, present, and future of languages. But three very different treatments, suiting three different reader temperaments.

For a quick, accessible, level-headed read, it would be difficult to better Tore Janson's *Speak*, an adaptation of a book written in Swedish. It is indeed a "short history". Don't be misled by "301 pages": these are small-format pages. But quantity isn't everything, and Janson manages to compress an extraordinarily wide perspective into its scope. Indeed, there could be nothing broader: he begins with Adam and ends 2 million years from now.

His basic idea is very simple: to survey "the role of languages in history" - how languages come and go, and why their paths differ so much. He sees the process as an interaction: "history is affected by languages, and languages are a part of history" (p.vii). Surprising as it may seem, this is a rather innovative idea. Histories of languages were popular a century ago, but have rather fallen out of favour since.

The organization of the book is logical and familiar: reflections on the origin and evolution of language, the emergence of the Indo-European family and of writing, the roles of Greece and Rome, the rise of Germanic and English, national languages in Europe, and colonial expansion. An account of how new languages (e.g. pidgins) appear is followed by one on how they "disappear"; he does not like the term "language death" because, he says, it suggests that languages have lives (p.230) - though this does not stop him talking about language "birth" elsewhere. The book then picks up speed, as he describes trends towards multilingualism and world English; and he ends in an explosion of speculation about the linguistic future of the race, in which all conceivable scenarios are explored, from political change (with English becoming less dominant) to human catastrophe..

This is an honest, sensitive, and sensible account: honest, because Janson tells us plainly when we don't or can't know something; sensitive, for he is acutely aware of the value of language diversity and the crisis of extinction; sensible, because he emphasizes a functional perspective for language use ("languages are no museum pieces. They are tools", p.98). A recurrent theme is that the naming of a language is a crucial step in its emerging identity. - "A language without a name does not exist" (p.230); "what is crucial for the existence of a language is whether people think it exists" (p.125). We might expect such a perspective from a writer in Scandinavia, where mutually intelligible languages are distinguished primarily by their names. One speaks Swedish because one is Swedish.

On the back jacket of Janson's book is the famous quote from Samuel Johnson, "Languages are the pedigree of nations". This is one of the driving forces behind Andrew

Dalby's apocalyptic vision, *Language in Danger* - a book which focuses on just one of the topics in Janson's survey, but a topic which is arguably the most important of all, as it deals with the "disappearance" of the world's languages Dalby doesn't like the term "language death" either, because the people involved do not normally die but switch to another language; he prefers "loss". However, like Janson, he cannot resist the anthropomorphic metaphor, slipping back into it and adding to it with "the after-life of languages".

Language endangerment has attracted three book-length treatments in the past two years, but another one is to be welcomed, for no ecological message can be repeated too often. "A language dies every two weeks" seems now to be standard rhetoric, in focusing the mind, and it is reiterated here on the back cover in prominent red, followed by the question "What are we going to do about it?" This promises a lively exposition, and the preface does indeed introduce a suitably dramatic tone. "Languages are being lost, month by month, year by year. Does it matter? Will it matter if we eventually become a one-language species?"

And then the steam seems to go out of the narrative. We are given a potted history of language, and an account of why languages spread and decline, including an "extended case study" of the Roman Empire and its languages. Dalby does this because this is a period of language where the whole story is known - but it is a lengthy and detailed story, told with copious illustrations from Plutarch, Cicero, and others, and many detailed language examples, so that by its close (p.82) the excitement induced by the preface is a distant memory. There are then further excursions about the issues involved - the nature of bilingualism, multilingual policy, the link between language and nationhood, the nature of minority languages - all very relevant, and well explained, but the drama now evaporated.

We eventually get to language loss on p. 206. The book will be over in 80 pages. As a result, the treatment of what is lost when we lose a language is disappointingly brief, and even though the book picks up speed again in the last chapter, on the loss of diversity, I feel an opportunity has been missed. For Dalby is indeed making dramatic claims. His masterclaim is that, because of the link between language and nationhood, the human race is on course to have its languages reduced to around 200 (because there are some 200 nations, and likely to remain so) and that this will happen in the next 200 years. With eight pages to go (p. 280), he says "no more bilingualism then".

This is breathtaking stuff, and I just hope readers will plough through the earlier chapters to get to the crunch, but I have my doubts. Dalby doesn't make it easy for them: he doesn't go in much for summarising his argument, and it becomes difficult to see the wood for the trees. There are some pretty substantial trees, too, with long quotations from earlier writers and detailed lists of language examples. The book tries to do too much, and as a dramatic appeal for our attention it doesn't quite work.

But *Language in Danger* does not live up to the promise of its cover in a second way. Recall that the blurb highlighted language loss and asks: "What are we going to do about it?". Dalby doesn't answer. The final sentence of the book says (p.288), regarding the spread of major national languages, "our great-grandchildren need us to stop doing it and find another way". But we are left in the dark over what such another way might be. Yet there is so much to be said here, not least about the amazing revitalization projects which are taking place today. Whether these are going to be successful is of course an issue, but that is beside the point. We need to know about them, for it shows what people are doing and how we might help, with time, money, or resources. Dalby tells us nothing about all this. But without a forward-looking perspective, any book on language endangerment loses its energy, and ultimately its persuasiveness.

The Babel story has surely now become a cliché for writers on language, but all three authors use it. Most writers still get it wrong. Dalby says: "at Babel we became multilingual" (p.11), but we didn't, for there were languages before Babel (as we learn from *Genesis* 10). I thought it a pity that John McWhorter should have used the cliché for the title of his engaging study *The Power of Babel* (by no means the first book with this title), but don't be put off by that. His approach is no cliché. Ignore also the trivial account of the book which the publishers have put on the jacket, where the author's insightful observations are reduced to

the phrase "fascinating oddities". Fascinating, yes: but the whole point of his book is that the linguistic observations he makes are not oddities.

The scope of McWhorter's book resembles Jansen. It is more natural history than political history, but it has the same kind of logical progression. There are similar observations about language numbers, variety, change, creation, and decline. McWhorter opts for the more usual figure of around 6000 languages in the world, and several times in the early pages we are told that an original single language developed into these 6000. This is true in a sense, but do not be misled by his phrasing into thinking there have been *only* 6000 languages in the history of the race. There have of course been thousands of others.

The Power of Babel is written with stylistic panache, tabloid rather than Times. McWhorter's epilogue on linguistic reconstruction is entitled "Extra, Extra! The language of Adam and Eve", and the book begins "I fell in love for the first time when I was four years old". Excuse me? This is a linguistics book? It is indeed, and the author's infectious enthusiasm, freshness of approach, and eye for fascinating detail makes language study really come alive.

It won't be to everyone's taste, though. In particular, I can imagine many British readers reacting against its American parochialism. Quite often I had a problem wondering what McWhorter meant, simply because I am not familiar with the US media world that he assumes we all know: for example, he lost me in his discussion of language change when he started talking about Barney Google and others. Who he? A joke about a Richard Rhodes left me cold. Something like this happens every few pages. Like many Americans, McWhorter takes it for granted that the rest of the world understands what they mean. We don't. A UK publisher's reader should have sorted this out.

In the end, these three voices - Swedish, British, and American - are preaching the same gospel: language history is both fascinating and relevant. They are all part of a new mindset in language study, stemming from a developing sense of global linguistic crisis, in which people look to the past to understand the present and to predict the future. Something important is happening to language, and these books in their different ways help us grasp what it is. Read one or all; but read one at least.