

Review of McWhorter, John. (2008). *Our magnificent bastard tongue: The untold history of English*. New York: Gotham Books (Penguin group). *Sargasso*, 2007-2008, II, 138-142.

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John McWhorter is one of the few linguists who can write well for a popular audience. Whether other linguists agree with his theories or not (he tends to be a maverick), they cannot deny his ability to present linguistic issues in an attractive, entertaining, and thought-provoking manner. McWhorter is astonishingly prolific. *Our Magnificent Bastard Tongue* is his twelfth book, and it arrived on the heels of a book on Hip-Hop and Black America. He also writes a column for *The New York Sun*, contributes frequently to *The New Republic*, and appears regularly on radio and TV shows. He is particularly well-known for his extensive pop-culture references, vibrant use of current slang, clever analogies, and irreverent wit. He is also noted for his often conservative politics, a fact that has little bearing on the book under review but may color the reactions of some linguists to his work.

*Our Magnificent Bastard Tongue* (not to be confused with *Bastard Tongues*, the latest book of another iconoclastic linguist, Derek Bickerton) is a raucous ramble through the history of the syntactic “kinks” of the English language. Unlike other popular books dealing with historical linguistics, this one does not focus on lexical matters, nor does it attempt to account for the “grand old history” of the language. Instead McWhorter provides sociohistorical and second language acquisition rationales for the development of certain common but “weird” grammatical features of modern English which he feels have been neglected by traditional scholars. He applies his considerable expertise in the field of pidgins and creoles to his speculative analysis of the different language contact situations that most likely produced the English language we know today.

McWhorter develops two main themes in his book. The first is that the English language is not unique in accepting borrowings from other languages (“Throughout the world, languages have been exchanging words rampantly forever.” [p. ix]). The second is that grammar is not a pure, proper construct that emerges from logic or reflects thought, but is rather the quirky by-product of human need and intercultural contact. While this is no news to linguists, it is a very vital point to make with laypeople who often feel that “grammatical” English is correct, logical, and refined, and anything that veers from the standard is “ungrammatical” and consequently wrong, illogical, and uncouth.

The book is divided into five chapters. Chapter 1 (We speak a miscegenated grammar—The Welshness of English) utilizes genetic, historical, linguistic, and archeological data to debunk the popularly accepted notion that the Celts were all exterminated by the genocidal Germanic hoards and thus had very little influence on the development of the English language.

Chapter 2 (A lesson from the Celtic impact—The “grammatical errors” epidemic is a hoax) is dedicated to demonstrating that “the conception that new ways of putting things are mistakes is an illusion” (p. 72) reflecting “nothing but a natural human discomfort with the unfamiliar, as well as a certain degree of the herding instinct...” (p. 74).

Chapter 3 (We speak a battered grammar—What the Vikings did to English) compares Old English and Old Norse and makes a convincing case for the Vikings' simplification of Northumbrian English in the Danelaw. "It was Scandi-land, where people not raised in English were speaking it as part of the everyday routine, leaving the niceties off" (p. 115). In this chapter, McWhorter uses his extensive knowledge of Germanic languages to show that "traditional scholars are not aware of how very much Proto-Germanic equipment English has tossed off" (p. 127).

Chapter 4 (Does our grammar channel our thought?—Hint: Does English grammar channel yours?) takes on the Sapir-Whorf hypothesis and expresses McWhorter's dismay at "how deeply the idea has permeated educated thought" (p. 144). Using data from a wide variety of languages, including Hopi, Boro, Algonquian languages, Guugu Yimithirr, Pirahã, and German, he concludes that "the idea that the world's six thousand languages condition six thousand different pairs of cultural glasses simply does not hold water" (p. 169).

Chapter 5 (Skeletons in the closet—What happened to English before it was English?) takes the reader back to Proto-Germanic to see possible historical scenarios that could account for the changes and abbreviations that distinguished it from Proto-Indo-European and set the stage for the eventual structure of Old English.

Among the more striking of McWhorter's well-argued claims are:

1. Progressive *-ing* for actions occurring at the present time and auxiliary *do* entered English via the Celtic speakers who coexisted with the Anglo-Saxons for some 1500 years and whose native languages had progressive *-ing* and auxiliary *do* type structures, absent in the other European languages. "Their rendition of English mixed their native grammars with English grammar, and the result was a hybrid tongue. We speak it today." (p. xxii). According to McWhorter, "Celtic was English's deistic God-- it set things spinning and then left them to develop on their own" (p. 9); however, the lack of expertise of most linguists in Welsh or Cornish has led to their overlooking or downplaying the Celtic variable. He gently chides Welsh linguist David Crystal for not giving enough credit to his own ancestors in the shaping of English.
2. English grammar makes it an "oddball" even among other Germanic languages because of the loss of so many features like case and gender markings and its abbreviated "structural blueprint." McWhorter attributes much of the difference to the effect of the Vikings who stripped Old English down to its bare bones as part of their second language acquisition process. "They beat up the English language in the same way that we beat up foreign languages in classrooms..." (p. xxi)
3. The abrupt shift from Old English to Middle English seen in documents is an illusion and the result of the post-Norman Conquest blackout of written English. During the 150 years or so after the Norman invasion, French was ensconced as the "scribal" language of England. Vernacular Old English must have been changing all along, but scribes recorded only the more traditional and conservative forms in their written texts, much as the *New York Times* ignores the type of English used by rappers today. Once the Normans were fully entrenched, scribes became more familiar with writing in French than in English,

and the English was written in a fossilized form. It was only after the Normans lost their power and succeeding generations began favoring English instead of French that contemporary scribes felt free to transcribe English in a manner that more closely approximated the way the people actually spoke.

4. The Sapir-Whorf hypothesis (which states that the peculiarities of a language determine the thought patterns and culture of its speakers) is completely unfounded, and those who persist in defending it are sentimental romantics. Whorf was ignorant of the true nature of Hopi's temporal markers, and as a result, his claims regarding the worldview of the Hopi and its distinctiveness from that of Standard American English speakers were in error. McWhorter also argues that the Sapir-Whorf hypothesis has to be rejected, because despite the dramatic simplifications in the English language brought about by the Viking occupation of England, we do not think more simply today than Anglo-Saxon villagers did. Of course, linguists have long rejected any strong form of the Sapir-Whorf hypothesis, so McWhorter is in essence setting up a straw man, but Whorfian thinking is very prevalent among laypeople.

5. The ancient Phoenicians may have been more involved in the development of English than most linguists have suspected. McWhorter, citing Theo Heinemann's work, speculates that consonants in Proto-Germanic may have been converted by Semitic speakers into fricatives as their native languages colored their pronunciation of Proto-Germanic. This then showed up generations later in English. The theory is tantalizing but still largely unsupported by archeological evidence; however, McWhorter maintains that it should be looked into.

There are many other intriguing observations tossed off along the way like crumbs to mark his path through the complexities of language history; however, the aforementioned should suffice to whet the reader's appetite.

I generally tend to like McWhorter's books, and I use them in teaching linguistics because they pique the curiosity of my students and infect them with enthusiasm for language. However, sometimes he tries too hard to be colloquial and conversational, peppering his statements with phrases like: "Check this out." "Get this.", and "Shit happens." The chatty style can be fun, but it tends to wear thin after a while. Some readers may also find the book to be too brief and rushed since it compresses complex academic debates and jumps over centuries to make points which may prove overwhelming to readers who are unaccustomed to unraveling linguistic controversies. More sophisticated readers may object to the lack of extensive citations; however, for those who need to check the scholarly sources he invokes so casually, there is a very useful twelve-page appendix titled "Notes on Sources." McWhorter's contentious and often repetitious assertions may additionally annoy readers who prefer more linear, traditional academic writing. He does go over the same points *ad nauseum*. However, if one regards the book as a series of classroom lectures by an impassioned college professor talking about his favorite topics, then the repetitions are more acceptable and even laudable.

Overall, the book is worth taking a look at, if only to open one's mind to new possibilities in the usual account of the history of the English language. As McWhorter puts it: "The vanilla version of The History of English will live on. But its proponents have not had occasion to engage with the underground stories

I have attempted to share with you, or having done so briefly, have opted to sweep them under the rug..." (p. 197). I would not recommend the volume as a textbook or major source for graduate research, but it makes a tasty appetizer before one plunges into a full-course linguistic banquet, and McWhorter performs a real service in pinpointing issues which merit more examination by historical linguists and archeologists. I can see a number of doctoral theses spinning off from the suggestions he offers.