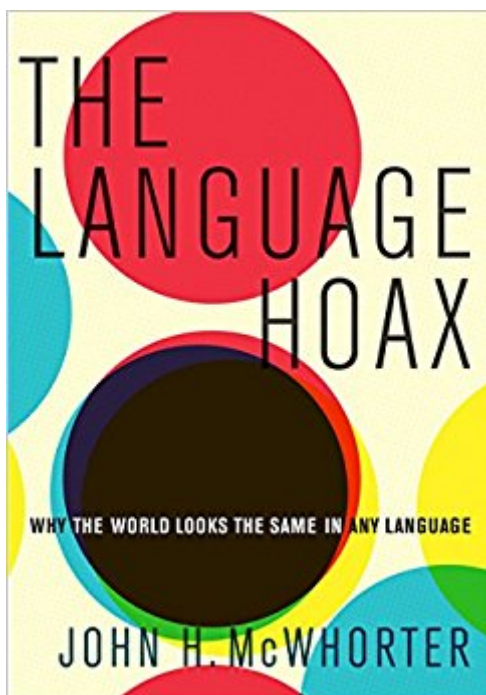


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The Language Hoax



Synopsis

Japanese has a term that covers both green and blue. Russian has separate terms for dark and light blue. Does this mean that Russians perceive these colors differently from Japanese people? Does language control and limit the way we think? This short, opinionated book addresses the Sapir-Whorf hypothesis, which argues that the language we speak shapes the way we perceive the world. Linguist John McWhorter argues that while this idea is mesmerizing, it is plainly wrong. It is language that reflects culture and worldview, not the other way around. The fact that a language has only one word for eat, drink, and smoke doesn't mean its speakers don't process the difference between food and beverage, and those who use the same word for blue and green perceive those two colors just as vividly as others do. McWhorter shows not only how the idea of language as a lens fails but also why we want so badly to believe it: we're eager to celebrate diversity by acknowledging the intelligence of peoples who may not think like we do. Though well-intentioned, our belief in this idea poses an obstacle to a better understanding of human nature and even trivializes the people we seek to celebrate. The reality -- that all humans think alike -- provides another, better way for us to acknowledge the intelligence of all peoples.

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Customer Reviews

I'm a huge fan of McWhorter. His basic technique is to take popular scholarship and basically turn it on its head. In this book, he takes on Whorfianism, especially Deutscher's fun read *Through the Language Glass*. In a series of easily understandable but erudite and very personable chapters (I swear, every time I read something of his, it makes me want to hang out with him and grab a beer together) he discusses the overreach and proper limitations of the idea of linguistic relativity to a general audience. You don't have to have read Deutscher to read this, but it might help if you want to make up your own mind--he does represent Deutscher's points accurately. Well written, fun, and brilliant.

McWhorter is always an entertaining and thought provoking writer.

I have read a number of this authors books, I like the style too.

Read *Through the Language Glass* first to get a sense of what McWhorter is putting down. Otherwise you may think this is about the Sapir-Whorf Hypothesis in all its glory. In the end, McWhorter gives a fairly good account of the political factors which may have created the hypothesis and also led to the current diminished form. But all that says nothing about the truth of the full form -- which is, by the way, not discussed or more than alluded to in either book.

I've been a fan of John H. McWhorter ever since he penned "Babel." He has a knack of making the often mind-boggling science of linguistics and the complexity of language not only accessible and comprehensible but also entertaining and delightfully educational. For years I've been waiting for someone with the savvy and wit of Socrates to take to task the language shapes thought crowd. McWhorter refutes the stale tale that the languages humans speak are relative to the culture in which they are expressed. In *The Language Hoax* McWhorter refutes Whorfian "truths" with knock-down arguments page after page from start to finish. The onus is on the Whorfians to prove that linguistic relativism is a tenable position to take.

Does the structure of the language we speak affect the way we think and how we perceive the world? If you are intrigued by that idea and don't mind re-examining any cherished

Sapir-Whorf beliefs you may have this short but spirited and well argued book will be of interest. When we think of the fascinatingly structured Navajo language there is some appeal to the idea that its speakers have a special, maybe advanced way of understanding reality, but with his usual well informed wit McWhorter makes the case that if you accept that and take the idea that language patterns and limits our perceptions to all its logical conclusions you'll end up with some very unpalatable and fortunately wrong judgements about various other peoples of the world--from the Chinese who speak a language which marks hypotheticals less explicitly than English (though surely Chinese speakers around the globe understand the difference between "She would have called him" and "She will have called him" anyway) to the people in New Guinea who speak languages with only one word for eat, drink, and smoke, (but who couldn't possibly be thus doomed by this lack to be unable to distinguish between those three activities.) Most people tend to take their own language's idiosyncrasies (and idioms) in stride, accepting them as what's normal, but language variations are the actual norm. McWhorter makes a convincing case that most of the often marvelous differences between languages are random, like spontaneous DNA mutations, and almost meaningless when we are looking at cognitive skills. Yes, I mean people with languages that have no way to indicate amounts higher than 2 or 3 will likely not be good at math, but McWhorter believes that is driven by circumstance and culture since hunter-gathers around the world and throughout time have not had much use for a number like 8,527. McWhorter is always entertaining, and I especially love all the fascinating language facts he deploys, like that the Tuyuca people, who also live in the Amazon, have a language so rich and complex there are multiple suffixes for every verb to indicate where the speaker learned whatever he or she is saying--there's one suffix affixed to the verb to let listeners know that speakers heard someone else say what they are now saying, another suffix for when the speakers instead saw what they are telling you, yet another for when the speakers think what they are saying is true but aren't sure, etc. The Language Hoax is replete with wonderful, mind-expanding language anecdotes. While it's definitely both fun and worth reading, this isn't my favorite of McWhorter's books. Because it focuses somewhat narrowly on the debate about the Sapir-Whorf hypothesis and its neo-Whorfian revival, The Language Hoax didn't glue me to its pages with the same level of intensity that some of McWhorter's other titles have, including Our Magnificent Bastard Tongue, which gives different insights into the history English than I have read elsewhere, The Power of Babel, which covers the worldwide history of language and its development, and What Language Is, which presents an almost fecund biological picture of how languages multiply, evolve, and disperse.

Excellent deep investigation of language and thought with approaches hard to resist.

Language fascinates me. I enjoy learning about it, I find Mr. McWorther's book to be well written and interesting. He has a gift for communicating complex information in a way that makes it available... I have found this title to be another good read.

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