

Language and Linguistics: How Words Changed My Life

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Undergraduate

Essay

During a dark time in my life, I got a job offer I always wanted: the position of bookseller at Barnes and Noble. I had recently withdrawn from my second effort at a university education, and was generally directionless and depressed. I had never had a job that wasn't just for over the summer, and I thought I saw a possible future in the company! Sure, it was not my childhood dream to move up the ranks of retail, but BOY did I love books. Books made everything worthwhile. As I began to learn my way around the store, I got to know certain sections better than others; the graphic novel was a high-theft area, the science section was usually devoid of customers, the religion section constantly in need of tidying. At the end of religion, after atheism, there was one neglected shelf: linguistics. Why, I thought, are these books not with the dictionaries and thesauri? I largely ignored it at first, because no one ever bought anything from there anyway.

Shortly after I began my job, I noticed one of my coworkers reading a book on break: *The Mother Tongue: English and How It Got That Way* by Bill Bryson. Intrigued by the title, I asked her about it. She explained to me the premise of the book, and how it traced the English language from before there was a writing system until today. I was intrigued; in the back of my mind, I had always wondered why English is the way it is- I remember asking why "I" is capitalized in grade school, and stumping my English teacher. On my next break, I picked up *Mother Tongue*, and powered through the first chapter. I was surprised at how easy to understand it was, and purchased it right away.

The next day, my day off, I spent inhaling *Mother Tongue*. When I finished that evening, my mind was swirling with words and history and more questions, so I returned to Barnes and Noble to more fully inspect the enigmatic linguistics section. I picked up several books with interesting titles like *Our Magnificent Bastard Tongue* and *Don't Sleep, There Are Snakes*, but was not sure what to make of them at the time. One book caught my eye, though, partly for the bad pun in the title: *Just a Phrase I'm*

Going Through. It had a friendly cover featuring an old man dancing along followed by words, and I couldn't resist smiling as I opened it. After flipping through and reading several random pages, I made use of my employee discount and bought it. As I began to read, I began to see similarities between the early interests of David Crystal and myself; we were both, early on, fascinated by language, but did not really know what to do with it, and were wandering souls. I knew that, one day, like David Crystal, I would find my passion, and be able to make my life around it. However, I had no idea that our passions would end up being the same!

Reading *Just a Phrase I'm Going Through* introduced me to the concept of a linguist; not just the study of languages, but a *person* who studies them. For some reason, I had never considered the human behind the study before. I promptly spent my next paycheck on *Our Magnificent Bastard Tongue* (another history of English), *Empires of the Word* (a history of various languages and the civilizations they were connected to), *Swearing* (a history of swear words in English) and *Don't Sleep, There Are Snakes* (about a strange Amazonian language with only present tense). The pattern at this point in my collection was language history books; I could not get enough of them. Once I realized that the origin of words was a legitimate topic, not just something to idly wonder about in English or French class, I had found a new chief interest. *Don't Sleep, There Are Snakes*, was a bit of a change for me though. Instead of being about the history English or a well-established language associated with an empire, it was about a tiny Amazonian language with only a few hundred speakers and what was, to me, a very strange grammatical system. I will admit, I was not nearly as interested in it as I was the other books I purchased at that time, but I saw some promise to it. It was the last book I read out of the group, but it made a huge impact both on me and my linguistic collection.

While David Crystal had mentioned dying languages in *Just a Phrase I'm Going Through*, *Don't Sleep, There are Snakes* focused on it. Growing up reading “National Geographic”, I always heard stories of explorers “discovering” peoples that had been uninfluenced by the modern world, and Daniel

Everett's book was like that to me. How had these people, while so few in number, been able to sustain their language? How long will it last? Are there more people out there with unique languages that still need to be documented and studied? I spent my breaks at work looking through Barnes and Nobles' online inventory for books on dying languages... and I was rewarded with *Dying Words*, *The Last Speakers*, and *On the Death and Life of Languages*, to name a few. It had become clear that at least one entire paycheck a month would be spent on linguistics books. *On the Death and Life of Languages* and *Dying Words*, while two of my most expensive purchases, were the first “real” linguistics books I had read. They were very pithy, and full of technical terms and charts and something called the International Phonetic Alphabet (I had to buy an introduction to linguistics book at this point, just to make sense of it all), but I got through them, and felt accomplished and enhanced for doing so.

I was gushing about how fascinating aboriginal languages were to one of my managers one day when he stopped me and simply said, “If you don't go back to school for linguistics someday, I'll be shocked.” I was taken aback. Like the linguist concept, for some reason I never considered possibly going to school to learn the subject. I had just purchased *Word Origins* and *Eats, Shoots and Leaves*, and, as I held them in my hands, I dreamed for a brief moment about returning to my first university and completing my degree, this time in linguistics. I was brought back to reality though by the fact that, working a minimum wage job, it was all I could do to afford rent and a linguistic book habit. I had worked at Barnes and Noble for almost a year with no sign of better things to come, so I put my mind to improving our tiny linguistics section. I advocated for its movement to the reference book section, with the grammar books and dictionaries (while buying such works as *The Professor and the Madman* and *The Ring of Words*, both about the writing of the *Oxford English Dictionary*), and began to make features at the front of the store for new linguistics books.

As sales gradually increased (and I do mean gradually- we would sell 2 linguistic books a week, tops, usually one of those being a purchase of mine), my linguistic interests expanded; I bought books

about foreign language idioms (*I'm not Hanging Noodles on Your Ears*), books about the history of silly American terms (*I Love It When You Talk Retro*), books about written language (*Language Visible*). However, during that same time, the Barnes and Noble brand e-reader came out, and our store was forced to drop everything and focus on that. The fact that an e-reader was taking precedence over actual books offended me. I loved my ever-growing linguistic book collection, recently expanded to two shelves on my bookcase. I could not imagine coming home at the end of the day to see a lonely e-reader on my shelf, rather than my neatly arranged books of various colors and sizes. Reluctantly, I resigned my position at the bookstore, and moved on to a better paying job that did not force me to compromise my opinions to sell a product. I will always treasure my time at Barnes and Noble, though, and have continued to go there to expand my linguistics book collection... even though they are downsizing.

With my new and better-paying job, I found that I was able to put money away in addition to supporting my literature habit, and I began once again to think of university. It had been a year and a half since I had left my previous school, and I wondered if I could be re-admitted. However, by happenstance and an internet search for David Crystal, I found that The University of Kansas had a linguistics program (I also bought another of Crystal's books after that same search, *Txtng: The Gr8 Db8*). I was ecstatic! Not only was David Crystal giving a talk somewhere I could feasibly get to, but an in-state university had a great linguistics program! I immediately began the application process, and here I am, a KU undergraduate linguistics major. Unfortunately, I was unable to attend David Crystal's talk, but I had the opportunity to go to London this summer to see him give a talk in the Globe Theater. While there, I bought his book *Begat*, and had the honor of meeting him and having him sign it. I brought my copy of *Just a Phrase I'm Going Through* all the way from America, and he signed that too. They are the most precious books in my collection.

As an official linguistics major now, I intend to expand my collection with more academic works in the future. I will certainly be hanging on to my linguistics textbooks, but I would also like to

acquire some works by Chomsky, and more detailed works on historical linguistics. Now that I have the tools to fully understand linguistic works, I feel that a whole new area of the study has been opened up to me. Trips to bookstores, now and forever, will begin with a visit to the linguistics section.

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- 1 Although I generally do not like language books organized into dictionary-like sections, Jag Bhalla uses this method to his advantage, and takes time to explain a bit of history and origins of each subject heading (examples include Animals, Appearances & Health, and Countries) before delving into foreign language idioms and their meanings. There are many chain emails and Internet sites boasting collections of “untranslatable” foreign words and phrases, but this book demonstrates the difficulty of literally translating any idiom into another language.
 - 2 This was my very first linguistics book. Bill Bryson has a nice, easy-to-read style that did not scare me away from the subject with large words and technical terms. This is a very good introduction to the world of language study for the curious, and also a concise (and humorous) history of the English Language.

Print.³

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3 Quite possibly the most influential book in my collection. Although this book is not purely about language, David Crystal's life is so permeated by language and linguistics that I believe this book belongs in any linguistic collection. Like Bill Bryson's *The Mother Tongue*, it is written in a way that non-linguists can understand while still communicating detailed information. I love this book because, unlike most other linguistic books in my collection, it is a personal life story that shows the interaction between the study and the studier. (Side note: My copy is signed!)

4 This work is one of the first and best (and only) on the language phenomenon of cellular phone text message language. David Crystal traces the "text speak" fad back to the early days of email and through the current cell phone boom, and explains why this new spelling convention is not ruining the English language, as some claim. He also reports on other languages' use of abbreviation in their texts, which I find fascinating.

5 Books about dying languages are always depressing, and leave the reader with a sense of helplessness. This book is no exception, although it is absolutely fascinating at the same time- like some sort of linguistic car accident. It is a perfect mix of the anthropology of the peoples speaking what is left of the language and the story of the languages themselves, and why they are fading. It focuses on Aboriginal languages of Australia (especially Kayardild), which is Nicholas Evans' area of expertise, but also touches on North American Indian languages and what will be lost when the oral traditions of these languages disappear.

6 This, like David Crystal's *Just a Phrase I'm Going Through*, is one of those rare linguistics books that is also about the author. Everett's work is much more focused on the life and language of the Pirahã (who, it was claimed, possessed no tense other than present and had no counting or color terms) than it is on his life, but the parts that are mentioned really draw the reader closer to the subject.

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7 This book is perfect for those who want an extremely detailed history of where their favorite curses originate! It traces the origins of such old favorites as “damn” and “fuck” and where one can and cannot use them in sentences for those sentences to remain grammatical, to such rare and archaic terms as “virago” and “Jesus shorten thy life”. Hughes references nearly all of the Canterbury Tales and much of Shakespeare in his explanations, pointing out swear words that I did not even realize were offensive at some point in history.

8 This is a wonderful work of linguistics combined with world history. Ostler, perhaps best known for his work on the history of Latin, traces dominant world languages according to the expansion and decline of their respective civilizations, as well as their impact on the languages around them. It is interesting to compare the histories of past “global” languages and the role of English in the world today.

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9 This relatively large tome not only tells of the mysteries of the world's untranslated scripts, but illustrates them with beautiful photos as well. It begins with success stories of previously deciphered ancient scripts, and moves on to discuss several scripts that remain enigmatic. This would be a fun book for anyone aspiring to be a code breaker or translator, and it makes the reader wonder about the secrets these ancient scripts could hold.

10 This book is arguably *the* seminal work of modern prescriptive grammar in popular linguistics. Truss' strong opinions on what is and is not correct in the English language has drawn fire from many other linguists (such as David Crystal), who are proponents of descriptive grammar- describing what is taking place in the language, rather than declaring it right and wrong. Despite her polarizing opinions, though, Truss delivers a scathing but humorous criticism of modern English "mistakes" in both grammar and punctuation, advocating a sort of grammarian army, to the rallying cry of "Sticklers unite!".