

March 2001 Meeting: The English Language and its Discontents

by Dave Thomas

New Mexicans for Science & Reason (NMSR) heard linguistics Prof. Henry F. Beechhold, retired from the College of New Jersey, Trenton, at our March 14th meeting. Beechhold's topic was "The English Language and its Discontents." Hank began by saying that "Nothing comes close to language in its complexity," and added that computers with all their detailed circuits are not complicated compared to language. Language is our most significant invention, Beechhold said, but we don't yet know how it really works: "How is language reproduced in the brain? How does a thought become a sentence?"

Hank criticized "stupid definitions" like the one for a sentence in grammar: "a subject and a predicate forming a complete thought" - because, he asked, "What is a thought?" He emphasized the connections between language and culture, and noted "The gadgets we invent re-invent us." Beechhold discussed the subtle flavorings of language, and explained how the word "is" can be more than just a factual assertion. For example, "is" can be a value judgment: "He is brilliant." "We look at the world through language-colored glasses," he said. Beechhold went on to discuss the fundamental interplay of presence and absence, and how things are often defined by what they are not: "Bush is no Clinton," for example.

Languages are unstable, just like humans, Beechhold said. Words can be swapped between different languages, and this can happen at different times, with curious "hodgepodge" results. Hank presented the origins of the word "civilization," which began with the word "hive," clearly related to an organized society. The "H" in Hive gradually developed into a "K" sound, and "Hive" morphed into "Kiv," and eventually "Civis," (pronounced "Kivas"); with the later adoption of the soft "C" sound, "kivas" changed into "civis," as in civilization. In a second example, the "D" in "Dent" gradually acquired a "T" sound, while the "T" in "denT" took on a "th" sound, and so the word "DenT" can be seen as directly ancestral to a word with the same meaning: "TooTH."

Beechhold discussed the origins and evolution of the English language, which has a common source with Germanic languages. He emphasized the importance of context, and how context is required to make sense of the words: is "fire" a noun? ("Put out the fire.") Or is it a verb? ("Fire the scumbag.") Hank stated that a full grammar is impossible, as is a complete dictionary. Language is too volatile, and the only languages that don't change are extinct ones, such as classical Latin. There are as many as 6000 languages, Beechhold said, and each one is inherently ambiguous.

Hank was the pronunciation editor for a large scientific encyclopedia, and had to choose the "proper" way for scientists to pronounce many science-related words. If you've been saying "kil-ó-me-ter," by the way, it's really "kíl-o-me-ter." Who pronounces "míll-i-me-ter" as "mill-í-me-ter," after all?

Thanks to Hank Beechhold for a fascinating talk.



Hank Beechhold

ADDENDUM: NOVEMBER 8TH, 2002

Beechhold corrects NMSR error...

Hank Beechhold takes issue with part of the summary of his last NMSR talk (March 2001, April 2001 NMSR Reports), and has kindly offered the following as a clarification.

The point I was making was based on Grimm's Law (aka, the First Germanic Consonant Shift), a schema (developed by Jakob Grimm of the Grimm Brothers) that shows how certain sounds in the Germanic sub-family of the Indo-European (IE) family of languages deviated from the other members of the Indo-European family. In this schema, to use but one pair of the affected sounds, what appears in non-Germanic IE languages, such as Latin (and many others) as a "k" sound equates to an "h" sound in the Germanic languages (of which English is a representative example). Thus, where we find in, say, Latin a "k" sound (as in the root "civis-," pronounced "kee-wiss"), we find in, say, English, an "h" sound, as in "hive." This is not arbitrary, for there must be a semantic relationship between the Latin root and the English word. We can see this relationship in the BORROWED word, "civilization" (where the "k" sound, as it happens, has been shifted, via French, to an "s" sound, but this is irrelevant to the point). So our word, "hive," has a semantic relationship with "civilization." This is important for, to repeat, we don't just arbitrarily match sounds up. The match must occur where there is a clear semantic connection. A beehive is, indeed, a "civilization" (as it were) of bees. Another example of Grimm's correspondences is the non-Germanic IE "and the Germanic "T," as illustrated with Latin "dent" (in BORROWED words like "dental," "dentist," etc.) and the English "t" (in English "tooth," exhibiting an obvious semantic relationship to the Latin root). In fact "tooth" shows two of Grimm's correspondences, the d/t pair and the t/th pair. A full explanation of the process that the sound-shift schema represents would take a good deal more discussion than you have space for in the newsletter, and no one but linguistics types would have the patience to follow it! To clarify a question that may arise: diachronic linguists (of which I am one) distinguish between linguistic elements that derive from a parent source - in this case Proto-Indo-European - and those that are simply borrowed at a much later time. English has been particularly free about borrowing, and was pushed hurriedly along this path in the aftermath of the Norman conquest (1066 and all that), although the borrowing actually started much earlier. After the advent of the Normans in England, the Norman brand of French (itself a form of Latin) insinuated itself into English in a big way. This, too, is an overly simple thumbnail view; it would take an entire course (which I gave) to unravel it properly.

- Hank Beechhold